

Stardust

LeninWerke

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Summary

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Description:

Cleyra smolders, Burmecia's restoration progresses. Freya and Fratley rediscover eachother. Steiner is forced to grow. Cid ponders. Steam engines impress and confound those they serve. A war orphan attempts to right several wrongs. - Complex ethical questions regarding the recent conflict, mist, technology, memory and nature fill the world. - A continuation of Final Fantasy 9.

1. The End

Authors Notes / preface:

I'm not a gamer, this is new territory for me. FF9 stands out to me as a beautifully done plot. Freya Crescent is a beautiful character who deserved more attention and the tying up of loose ends. Same case for Fratley. This story is primarily a work to rectify the loose ends not tied up that do not sit right with me.

I've watched several playthroughs and I am writing this work to be as respectful to the canon of the game as is within my ability and any errors in continuity, character, or otherwise shall be mistakes, and I would appreciate if any were pointed out. All other criticism is equally welcome.

"To be forgotten is worse than death." Rings with irony as Freya as a character seems to have been forgotten midway through the game.

Disclaimers:

The usual; in that I do not own this world or any of the characters within it. Any original characters appearing within are my creation but shall be

characterized and written in a way respectful to the established canonical world.

The writing style shall be at times flowery, but I feel this is necessary to respect the world in which this story unfolds.

Lastly: I have fully illustrated this story and I wish to share the illustrations with you all, but I am at a loss as to how to insert illustrations, or provide links to these illustrations within this story on . The cover picture is a cropped example of one such illustration. I will upload this work on “archiveofourown” with illustrations if possible, so keep a look out for this story there when it is finished.

I hope enjoy the following work. Updates may take time, but it shall be finished.

—LeninWerke

Here begins the story;

— THE END —

“I just want to cherish our time together”

Since she had left, he had maintained a vigil. Rebuilding Burmecia was truly the last thing on his mind. Fratley sat at the wrecked fountain, worrying the petals off of a flower.

There had been something so grim, so final about that statement of hers, and with her gone all he had was all the time in the world to ponder any hidden meanings it might have.

Even with no memory of her, he felt things shift inside him when she was near him and he found her as fascinating as she was beautiful. And he was utterly terrified of losing her for a reason he could not rationally explain.

“We won’t let that happen. She won’t make a move as long as we have our airship fleet. Don’t worry, everything will be fine” -Cid Fabool IX

Freya stood quietly in the shady solitude of a garden surrounded by polished black marble and nearly still water.

She had to admit; the new monument was imposing but a place of wholesome respite. It could not however quite be called a war monument

because what had happened could not quite be called a war.

Her Majesty's Airship Red Rose sat silent and still atop a great plinth of polished black marble, built high with its sides slightly slanted.

Garnet had wanted nothing whatsoever to do with the vessel after all of the havoc Brahne had wrought upon the world with it, and had made it the center of the monument as a markedly un-subtle reminder of precisely this.

Most of the ship's machinery built of expensive metals including the main engine and shafts had been removed and either sold to Lindblum's industrial market for a healthy sum, or used physically to rebuild Alexandria, but those close to Garnet suspected it was more a personal mission to ensure the airship could never be flown again should anyone want to try.

Surrounding the airship and its tall plinth on all four sides was wide channel of calm water as smooth and as glassy as crystal, surrounded itself by a further gallery of black marble who's smooth top surface comprised a wall and walkway. Its perimeter was immense and took the better part of an hour to circle on foot. Beyond this outer gallery, gardens and

ponderous trees that petered out into the natural flora and rock. It sat some distance outside the city, Only Alexandria Castle's sword and spires, and the finials on the screw masts of Prima Vista towered above the tree line to the East.

Freya had silently slipped away as soon as the beautiful, awful display of reunion between Garnet and Zidane had concluded. She could not bear to watch it or speak to any of them. Before the play had finished, Garnet had been the only one of the group present with any understanding of her misery due to her loved one being missing. They had been, in that way only, two of a kind.

Now, all for her had been mended and, as before, countless times, Freya was the only one left alone and miserable with no one present to even understand her anguish. After a quick gesture of respect to the new Queen, she had vanished into and against the tide of the throngs moving in toward the spectacle and run from the city.

A lonely long-bearded gardener placed and tended black roses. Something had been done by a quiet old potionmaker on the architectural commission to make the flowers here bloom black. For all Freya knew, this was that very person.

Large, shady and contemplative trees towered around the monument's outer boundary and almost completely tunneled in the staircase leading up from the ground to its perimeter, and at the top end of that staircase was a somber but beautiful courtyard surrounded by gardens with an asymmetric compass rose of only three points on its surface. Lindblum, Burmecia, Cleyra. At the center of the compass rose stood an imposing sundial.

All of this was made of the same mirror-polished black marble, so closely jointed that the entire monument appeared to have been carved from a single piece; and so smooth that one could roll a droplet of water across its surface. A marvel of masonry.

The quiet figures drifted slowly over the marble and under the trees, sat upon the slabs of benches or stood like statues, some together some solitary. Mostly clad in subdued tones, not one grain of pomp and circumstance, some quietly shedding tears, they were of every race and walk of life but amongst them she caught sight of many familiar long white ears and tails, all drooped.

Across the mantle of the black marble wall that ran along the water's edge were carefully placed

tens of thousands of objects by each mourning visitor. Candles in jars or paper lamps, trinkets and baubles, handwritten notes, names on scraps of parchment, children's toys and small vases of flowers, small carved figures or spiritual symbols, jewelry and all manner of tiny stones from small finely cut crystals to simple pebbles, each bearing equal but secret significance to those who placed them, all this producing a narrow flood of color against the mirror black.

Freya's heart beat in melancholic, stagnant step with theirs.

She stood at the wall with her back to the sundial and directly in front of the prow of the former flagship. Here, between her and it, were chiseled artfully into the wall large engravings of the four wrecked kingdoms as they appeared just after each was ransacked, war torn or completely obliterated. Below each rendition was displayed the name in Old Gaian.

**“ALEXANDRIA” — ‘BURMECIA’ —
“CLEYRA” — “LINDBLUM”**

The rendition of Cleyra was particularly painful to look at. The great tree had been drawn as a faint

outline, with only the burnt and decimated hollow stump of what remained rendered fully.

She remembered what she had said.

“I will protect Burmecia, you have my word. I will protect my home and my king at any cost”

She put her left forepaw upon the engraving of Burmecia, and let her palm fall flat.

“I met with utter failure when trying to defend Burmecia, I will not allow Brahne to exert her will upon us any longer!”

“I could not bring peace to Burmecia and thus fulfill Sir Fratley’s wish, but now all I can do is protect this beautiful place. Doing so will help me”

She put her right forepaw upon the engraving of Cleyra.

Holding back a river of stinging tears, she willed Time to reverse.

With all she had seen walking the world and beyond it upon her disastrous travels, all of the great and mysterious and powerful things beyond her comprehension, she willed any great force that would heed her pain and silent plea to erase the

damage that had fallen upon the world that had effected her life, to restore all she had lost, or to reverse Time so she might get one last chance do it herself.

Remaining in this position for what seemed an eternity, supporting herself with her forepaws upon the engravings, she eventually slowly turned with a deluded and dim hope to check the sundial.

The shadow had moved clockwise. Time had not reversed.

She let out an empty dry laugh. Why should it reverse, no fortune or chance or luck had ever heeded her prayers, or her resolve, or her silent pleading, or her desperate cries. No wish however fervent had ever helped her or come true, as they seemed to for so many others. Nothing she had ever done had been good enough or had truly made a difference for herself. Even when she had helped others, she had been powerless to help herself and reach or achieve what her own heart wept for. She only out of all the rest had been as a leaf, forever at the mercy of the winds of Time.

Her whole inside felt like broken glass.

The shadow on the sundial not only told her that Time had continued forward and continued laughing at her, but that it was also nearly time to depart. The theatre ship would leave in one hour, and it would take her nearly that long to return to Alexandria to board her.

Freya carefully laid the flowers she had brought underneath the engravings of Burmecia and Cleyra, drew her arm across her chest in the customary sign of respect, and turned to leave.

Prima Vista's bowsprit cut the peak of a cloudbank cleanly in half. Despite her heavy load of passengers and relief supplies, the airship seemed to laugh at mountain peaks and wide rivers and the towering clouds that obscured them. As she did so, that bowsprit pointed at Burmecia.

The sensation of Flight was as lost on Freya now as it had been the first time she had ever ridden aboard an airship. That first time had been after she had been numbed by the loss of Fratley. All the color in the world had faded for her, then. Part of her wished she could have experienced that sensation with the awe and wonder it seemed to bring

everyone else, as she wished she could experience every other thing that seemed so special to everyone else. That had been taken from her with Fratley.

All she knew was being heartbroken, and it slowly, steadily became worse.

Here she stood upon a ship that could sail upon clouds, heartbroken.

Since she left Burmecia to attend the play, she had been pining to return there, and to Fratley, or the ghost of Fratley. Now she deeply regretted seeing everyone but her so happy. Chivalry be damned, bitterness was growing and she knew it dangerous, but it did grow regardless. She had barely any idea why she went to Alexandria in the first place save going through the motions of life like a clockwork doll, and her constant restlessness. Her feverish desire to solve the problems that plagued her regarding her kingdom and her lost but found but still lost loved one drove her over land and sea and now sky as they always had. All her life since he had vanished had been spent in transit to somewhere; driven by the imagined resolutions surely possible upon eventual arrival. Rest and peace for her were always over the Horizon. When she got to where she

was going, surely she could make everything better. If not there, then at the next destination...

All she saw in front of her eyes now was overlaid constantly with images of the past.

As the ship plied the skies, she was no longer aboard Prima Vista but instead aboard Red Rose. Her body was weary from trying to protect the people of Cleyra, and in pain from the unnatural magic of teleportation. Her heart was full of anger and her body full of adrenaline from fighting and from being in grave danger of being discovered aboard that ship.

And far, far worse, her nostrils were full of smoke and her eyes were full of a nightmare as she gazed down upon the smoldering, blackened remains of Cleyra's tree and its people. Her people. She saw it as clearly in front of her in the clouds looking down from Prima Vista as she had in the mist before her looking down from Red Rose, which had brought Brahne so easily to Burmecia, and then to Cleyra to destroy it in the first place.

Damn these airships. There was nothing good or marvelous about them to her. Even their distant presence signaling the strength of Lindblum had pulled Fratley from her arms in concern for their

King and Country before she had ever even seen one. These idiotic machines that were the playthings of the rich and powerful had made her lands, her people, her loved ones and her life a ruin.

She kicked the timber of the sheer strake, hard. It hurt her badly, and it did not hurt the ship. She stumbled to her small cabin.

Prima Vista effortlessly vaulted the outer and inner walls of Burmecia, and came to a stop above a stone courtyard that had been hurriedly constructed for airship landings as part of reconstruction. Alexandria and Lindblum had begun to regularly, feverishly send supplies for relief and rebuilding, and to aid all of Burmecia's people. With the supplies came a steady stream of returning refugees and victims.

The air was clear despite the rain, and through the gray cloud cover slipped slivers of pink mid-afternoon light. As the airship hung in the air over the courtyard, those below slipped blocks using prybars along greased wooden runners into position to bear the shape of Prima Vista's hull. She presented a challenge due to the amount of screws

and shafting and machinery underneath her, as she was mostly meant to land on water.

Once the task had been completed to the satisfaction of the captain and crew, the enormous vessel carefully lowered herself down onto the blockwork and shed her weight from her airscrews. The pounding of the steam engines and the beating blades slowed to silence and was replaced with the creaking of a settling hull.

A primitive but gigantic wooden jib crane was slid into place and brought to bear over the ship's foredeck. The Burmecian people had cut down the largest trees and sawn the largest single logs in their Kingdom to build it, and since then it had greatly increased the speed at which supplies could be unloaded and the weight of those that could be brought. Men worked tirelessly at the great capstan at its base against the heavy loads, especially those of new quarried stone.

Freya disembarked underwhelmingly the same way every other able bodied person did, by an uncomfortable rope ladder. The crane was too taken up with tonnage of supplies to carry any people save the injured who could not brave the ladder. She hardly took notice of the towering and crude

contrivance or anything else unfolding, she wished to be away from the airship and back amongst familiar streets and people. Leaving the airship and the courtyard was as a blur.

As the pale white speck of Freya Crescent disappeared into Burmecia, a small brown stowaway also made his way off the ship, hiding in a barrel stacked in a load of supplies being lowered by the crane. He surveyed his surroundings carefully through the partially open lid as it came down in the courtyard, and scampered off before anyone could come and offload or inspect the barrel.

He was pleased that the attempt had been too easy, but extremely frustrated that he had not been able to enjoy his first ride on an airship. The amount and attendance of the crew in the cargo hold had been so great that his time out of the barrel had been limited to stealing food and water and relieving himself and he had never once even had the chance to look out a window. He was still aching from the effects of a strong whiskey he had stolen from one of the passengers.

He was far more upset when he saw what had become of Burmecia. It was very different than

simply being told about it. He did not count on just how it would affect him.

He had heard and been told many things, including that his father the King was dead, which he knew of course could not be true.

“Lord Puck!” Greeted the first Burmecian he tugged on in joyous surprise. She knelt.

“You need not kneel to me, I’m just looking for my old man, is he in the palace or would I find him somewhere else?”

She instantly looked miserable and shook her head at him.

“It’s alright.” He said reassuringly. “Nobody seems to know where he is, if you don’t I’ll just ask someone else!”

“Lord Puck...”

The city was a randomized patchwork quilt of dead and living. Some streets or districts still totally abandoned, others glowing with the sparks of everyday life trying to regain a foothold.

Freya would turn a corner into a dark square to find the stones upturned, rows of houses abandoned or caved in, collapsed statues and dry fountains, the remains of markets or smithies scattered out from smashed out doors picked clean of anything of value as if the inhabitants had been gone for decades.

Yet through an alleyway she would make out a candle lit window in the walls above, and around another corner she would find houses inhabited, fires glowing in fireplaces, buildings made whole again, groups of her people and others busily at work putting right collapsed walls, burst windows, smashed in doors, caved in roofs. Talking, trading, sometimes a child playing would splash in the color of the Kingdom she had left so long ago.

She made her way through one of the thoroughfares she knew all too well. Here was a lively scene of work despite the downpour. Her people mixed with foreigners, mostly Humans in point of fact. Journeyman carpenters, stonemasons and millwrights from parts far away had come with the supplies on the airships to work. She hardly noticed such a mixture in Lindblum or even Alexandria, but those were ports of trade and commerce, here it felt very strange to look at and left an oddly sour taste in her mouth which she was

surprised at herself for. She pondered their presence and her gait slowed.

All these people trying to assist. Many under the flag of the powers who had caused the problem they were now assisting with in the first place, and or sat idly by and watched. How much of what she saw was earnest? She knew full well nobody was making a profit off of it since these arrangements were missions of mercy, but how many of these would be do-gooders from afar were here for truly selfless reasons? How many were here in a selfish attempt to quench guilt, to foremostly feel better about themselves?

She was in equal parts in awe of and exasperated by the intensity of the work here.

Pole-awnings had been set up and anyone who could fit under one was performing a job, especially the carpenters so the constant wetness would not jam their saws. A Burmecian kiln had been drug out of the wrecked clay works clear on the other side of the city and was firing brick. Fresh timber sat over its lid so as to dry out from the rain. There were barrels of paint and varnish and boiling creosote. Four able-bodied rats were furiously working a stone saw back and forth. The line of work spanned the facades of

seven buildings, all but one of which were so covered in scaffolding they could barely be seen. Deadeyes, block and tackle to lift and lower had been set up and more of it was going up. Freya had to pass all of it to continue on her way as if beholding a street performance.

And here was something else she had never seen with her own eyes before. Upon a stout carriage with eight immense cannon wheels swung the machinery and great iron arm of a steam shovel from Lindblum. The contraption dug into the ruined road with its clamshell as its master worked the levers and wheels back and forth, and another man clinging to the back stoked the open orange maw of the boiler fire door with anything that would burn. More of her people jumped down into the trench as the machine dug it out, setting to work on the exposed water pipe of the once proud centuries-old system that brought the old nuisance of rain into the homes of the city to be used for washing and drinking.

So, other people's machinery had come to Burmecia.

She found herself detesting this. It did not belong. None of this belonged. She began to detest herself for that resentment, for here was all she had wished

for, Burmecia being rebuilt and lifted back onto its feet. Nothing was as it had been nor as it seemed would it ever be again. She evidently did not belong, either.

The warm hued downy gray overcast began to darken as afternoon turned to evening. One of the familiar street lamps burned warm golden glow, the lamplighters had been busy. The solitary lantern upon its post amidst the detail-covering darkness brought to her warm familiarity and a brief wave comfort. She closed her eyes basked in it, and was left cold as it passed.

She came upon an equally familiar ancient tavern she had spent a great deal of time at in her brighter years and was surprised to see light streaming from the windows. She came to the window like a ghost.

She gazed in from the rain on a mix of good cheer and misery. Her breath fogged the glass, so she drew back and turned her head slightly. At the long bar made of a halved log that had storiedly been there for one thousand years sang and drank a group of faces, some familiar to her. Their raucous song and thumping of flagons rattled the panes of glass near her face. She was surprised at their resilience. She was surprised, and heartened by, and

estranged by, the resilience of some of her own people. If only they had seen what she had seen.

And then there were the others. Her keen sight did not pick them out so quickly simply because of their lack of motion. Some sat at the ends of the bar, some in the aged chairs against the walls, at the tables or hidden away in the dark corners that once belonged to lovers, where she and Sir Fratley had once spent evenings...

Sir Fratley...

She swallowed the stabbing grief and continued to try and distract herself from the gaping open wound no one could see.

Those forlorn and weary sat in stillness over drinks or over nothing at all, each displaying the unique characteristic of misery in her people of a lowered nose, fallen ears and an utterly limp tail. She knew most of whom she gazed at had suffered at least one important loss besides the disheartenment of seeing their Kingdom brought to its knees. Yet she felt estranged from even these poor figures, for if only they, too, had seen what she had seen.

For none had walked Beyond the World, none had discovered the true and horrible nature of things, or how easily that nature could be tampered with, or had seen what became or could become of the very fabric of a friend or lover or family member once their body was too broken to hold that feeble shimmering force any longer.

Memories of her own people's suffering blended with memories of the awful distortions and unfriendly blue light of a different and dying world that birthed nightmares, the nightmare false tree that was not a tree, the airborne nightmare eye, and how these bad dreams come to life meant that at least for a time, there was no true rest even for the dead. All these things she had once thought, and those she gazed in on *still* thought, were only seen in bad dreams and could be escaped upon awakening. She found herself shivering in the wet night chill, more from the awfulness in her than the chill itself.

She was brought out of her dangerous thought by one of those miserable figures inside catching sight of her and looking at her, in every way as if she were a ghost. For only a moment she lingered and gazed back, withdrawing before the tears started again, and walking onward.

Her poorly wrapped feet hurt her. She felt old.

Freya no longer knew where she was going and wandered aimlessly in a fog of inner turmoil, trying to escape it and stabilize herself by motion.

As she went and passed through places familiar and not, she saw those she recognized from the tavern stumbling home. Those who had been singing were now silent or wailing piteously or running into walls. The drink that had been swallowed in was now being heaved out. One had sat down in a pile of rubble and was rubbing his eyes as a child would. Resilience no longer...

Her code of knighthood demanded she assist, but she couldn't. She didn't even know where these poor souls did dwell, even those she knew, and they were most assuredly not in a state to remember themselves. Morning would come with pain and headache, but they would go home. She felt as if she had no home to go to. She had to find her way to some sort of silence or she felt she would die this very night.

She had failed Burmecia, after she promised out loud that she wouldn't. She then failed to protect

Cleyra, after she made another promise that she wouldn't. Her promises were irrelevant. She was irrelevant, and helpless. Whether it was from unkind chance or her own inadequacy she did not know, nor did she know which would have been worse. Perhaps her life of eternal disquietude and restlessness was fitting punishment for her broken promises and these ruined lives.

She had lost everything.

And now she passed the graveyard, a wide plot where the dwellings petered out that ran and disappeared in every direction. Bordered by a mysterious and ornate twisted wrought iron fence, it seemed to continue forever with only the shape of the palace in the rain impossibly far away at its other side indicating its extent. There was damage here, scars in the ground and tilted headstones, chips or dents in crypt doors. The Alexandrians had lacked even respect for the dead, such had been their attempt to demoralize her people.

She would never forgive them.

This place also showed subdued signs of repair. Tools lay about, a headstone here and there had been propped up with timber. Far away in the dark moved the orange specks of candle lanterns. At the same

time, she saw many new stones had been added. Hundreds in fact, as she continued along the fence, and in the cold rain stood mourners.

Around the graveyard she went on, arriving at the palace in an inky black world.

Her people were rebuilding it, even at night, in this rain.

Here she instantly saw her Fratley buried in the effort, no longer truly hers, never truly hers.

“And I lost you, too. No matter how I tried not to.” She said out loud, her voice being driven to the ground by the rain.

Her search for him had heightened her senses to the point where she could pick him out in any condition or quality of light, by his face, the shape of his ears, his movements, the weight of his stride. She picked him out over the great distance between her and the palace, and in the absence of any light save the dim flickering lanterns there.

She stepped towards him and found herself running. The sight of him drove her on, as the imagined unforgettable silhouette of him against the

horizon had driven her to run over the Wide World. She was suddenly able to ignore her aching feet; she suddenly had a direction again.

Perhaps since she last saw him some kind gift had restored to him his memory. Perhaps fortune had finally favored them. Maybe she would reach him and find all that was lost to have been regained. All she had to do to find out was run faster and reach her beautiful missing Fratley.

She further quickened her step when she saw him catch sight of her with a chance turn of the head and abruptly stop his work. He scaled the scaffolding in one jump. Could it possibly be...?

Of course, it could not.

She slowed, paces from him. He was outwardly happy to see her, but there was no true recognition. She saw the emptiness behind his brown eyes and in his greeting before she reached him. It fell flat, as did her fast pace. She nearly tripped in her transition from sprinting to walking. She was suddenly aware again of the awful pain in her feet.

“I have *missed* you, Freya. Welcome home.”

This stopped her and almost brought forth a laugh. It faded into a smile before it left her lips.

Fratley, even devoid of memory, had not changed.

He was developing old feelings.

She remembered him greeting her like that after long days or weeks apart in their summer days. The same expression, the same outstretched paws.

And yet she was at an utter loss. She was still young, but so many years had been stolen from her, from them both, and some of those stolen *by* him, she did not feel young anymore.

Fratley too was painfully aware of something, everything, being wrong. And he was too timid to assist her, paradoxically due to her concern for her. Timidity was absolutely new to him and he was frightened by it. It was an emotion and a characteristic he had never been familiar with.

Damn this gaping hole in his head. He was sure whatever he was missing was worth remembering, because love for her grew inside that emptiness. He wished to hold her, he wished to enwrap her in warmth and light the world around her with color and tranquility despite her being new to him, and he somehow now knew that he had felt this way long

ago and not just because she had told him so. It felt integral to his very being.

He knew she was yearning for some kind of response because even now he knew her well, but due to his lack of memory of her he did not know which response would be the familiar and correct one she was seeking and was thusly silenced with inaction. It burned him.

He finally chose one that was loving but innocuous. "Let me take you home."

She remembered the last time he had said that to her, it felt as in another life. It had been after they had almost suffocated on eachother's kisses. His tongue had burned as he let out that request, as did his eyes, and his fingers on her, and hers on his.

He didn't remember any of this, but he knew in that moment he had upset her.

They arrived at her home. The aged and tiny dwelling carved into the stone itself under the lee of a natural rock formation was very different than the closely packed dwellings in the city squares and districts. It was where she had lived long before she

left Burmecia, during her Novitiate, after she had been orphaned. Although somewhere not coveted by her neighbors and a place seen as befitting someone low in status, It had apparently been of so little importance to the Alexandrian Army that it had been left undisturbed, a small blessing. No one had since tried to lay claim to it. The rain had soaked her through to the bone, but she was slowly beginning to dry due to Fratley holding his lengthy cloak entirely over her as they walked.

“Your place of rest, my fair Lady.” Fratley presented the dwelling before her with a genuine attempt at humor in his voice that she was immensely grateful for. She nuzzled his arm and took his forepaw in hers.

He repeated his customary farewell that he had given her since they rediscovered each other. “Please sleep deeply tonight.”

She stared intently at him, probing him for any spark of familiarity. He stared back, equally intently, trying to bring one forth for her.

“I will.” She finally replied. There was so much more she yearned to let out, but didn’t.

He smiled down at her and stroked her hair.

She left the security of his draped cloak and braved the rain for a few more seconds to reach the stout oaken iron strapped door.

She briefly, awkwardly glanced at him as she fought with the old latch, for the door no longer sat correctly and was hard to open and close. Then with a shove, into the dark she went, and closed it behind her.

She was expecting total darkness, but there was a candle lit for her on the table. It had to have been he who set it there. Finally alone within the confines of her own world, finally beyond the sight and judgment of others, she let the stinging pain in her feet bring her to the floor, her arms and head fell and she began to bitterly, loudly weep.

There was no window in the door, and the small window that faced the front of the dwelling had a pair of eternally drawn curtains that she reliably kept closed.

Fratley did not leave. In fact Fratley never left whenever he bid her farewell at this door and she shut it behind her. Each night she had been in the house since her first return he had remained within the boundaries of its stone walls. He would protect this beautiful woman. He would stand sentinel over

her with more resolution than he would even for his Kingdom. Damn this gaping hole in his head, and his newfound cowardice, and his lack of ability to ask her to come inside with her lest he violate the delicate new trust he was trying to form with her.

His finely tuned ears rose of their own accord at a new sound. It came from within the house; in fact it came from just behind the door.

He had never heard her cry before. But how could that be true, he had to have. He *must* have, with the sudden and intense and stinging feelings it flooded him with. Damn to hell this gaping hole in his head! He went to the door and placed his forepaw silently upon the latch, but did not lift it. He pressed his ear to the door and let that beautiful, awful sound come to him. It rattled him to his very center.

Fratley pondered in that instant relinquishing the duties of a Knight then and there, if it meant being even one step closer at hand to her.

Even with his only distant intact notion of being a Dragon Knight keeping him to a course, his entire directive had changed:

“I must *not* lose her again. I *will not* lose her again. *Again?*”

Was this reflexive thought from what she had told him of the life they had lead together, or the real echo of a memory? He could not even remember the extent of what she had told him of that life.

He could not remember. Indeed. This would have been hilarious to him if not for this awful state of affairs, and poor Freya’s cries just beyond the door.

More importantly, he decided it did not matter which it was, so long as he helped her now.

He did remember that he had *not* told her that his home had been destroyed and had yet to be repaired, so she would have one less concern to selflessly fret over. He had also not told her that he had been doing all his washing and sleeping in the eave of the small shed over her cistern to protect her, and protect her home, and would continue to do so for the rest of his life.

2. Jack of Spades

— JACK OF SPADES —

Under a moonless sky in which the stars shewn as a brilliant silvery tapestry against the dusky red of the recent sunset, a diminutive cloaked visitor came to the polished marble steps of Alexandria Castle from parts unknown.

It was easy for him to pass the guards as his youth was given away by the tone of his voice, and yet he spoke with confident eloquence unbecoming of his years. The gossip had been true, the castle was working on far more of an open-door policy with Garnet on the throne. Severity and suspicion seemed all but gone from Alexandria Castle.

“I wish to pay respects to the skilled and beautiful General Beatrix!” This, combined with perfectly rehearsed and selective flattery to the more stubborn examples, got him through the side gate, up three flights of stairs, down a principal hallway, and right up to the last staircase before the Queen’s gallery. Here stood a guard who was annoyingly good at her job, for she did not wish to let him pass under any circumstances unless he removed his

cloak. This was the one thing he would not, could not relent upon.

“I am sure the greatest swordswoman in Alexandria could defend herself against a young boy even if he had a weapon on him!” He bargained.

The guard laughed. “She might have cause to worry indeed even with no blade, for the sharpness of your tongue.”

“I.....I have injuries, from the war.” The cloaked little boy muttered, becoming much quieter and taking on a more earnest tone.

The guard softened. “Let me see?”

“It’s... embarrassing.” He slipped a forepaw from his cloak. It was so lacerated and misshapen that its original shape could barely be discerned, the guard recoiled.

“Oh, oh my. Little one, I am sorry.” She cooed.

“My head is much worse.” He said, telling the truth. The guard was moved by the honesty in his small voice. “It would have been much worse if it weren’t for Beatrix. That’s why I want to see her.” He lied, just as deftly. The guard did not detect it.

Beatrix had just finished arranging her dresser when there was a knock upon her chamber door.

“Enter!” She called.

The door opened to her customary guard, with a tiny cloaked figure. “A visitor for you, General! It was very hard to tell him no.”

Beatrix smiled. Part of her duties were graciousness.

“And how may I help you?”

“I have travelled far to pay my respects to you, fine warrior!”

Beatrix tilted her head and her eyes curved slightly closed with warmth at this statement from a child’s voice, her full titian hair settling at the new angle. She made a subtle gesture and the guard took her leave of them, shutting the door.

“My Fiancé is still in his bath.” Beatrix said. “Please make yourself comfortable, and do let me see you!”

The cloaked figure did not make his way to chair or cushion or the bowl of fruit upon the table, nor did he sit down. He simply undid a drawstring and let the cloak slip off.

Beatrix's expression instantly changed to one of revulsion and horror.

There stood a young Burmecian male, or rather, about half of one. His entire left side was no longer white, but the pink of exposed, burnt, improperly healed flesh. His left ear was a few cauterized tendrils of blood upon wasted cartilage. His left eye was a hollow, equally cauterized socket, a gaping hole into his head. His lip and muzzle on the left side had been burnt or torn off and had exposed some of his rear teeth. His left forepaw was barely a paw anymore, and his arm was wrapped in bandages as was most of his midriff.

Beatrix panted and she took a step backward.

"Surely you are braver than that, M'lady."

His voice, while oddly steady for any child, let alone one this damaged, bore no malice, or even anger. This quieted her somewhat, but she was surprised at her own hoarseness when she asked; "Who — who are you?"

"My name's Jack." He said quietly. "I'm from Burmecia."

"Bur — mecias." Beatrix said in an involuntary whisper.

“My mum and dad tried to protect my brother and me by going to Cleyra after you attacked our home.” Jack continued. “But then you destroyed Cleyra, so mum and dad and my brother died, but I didn’t.”

Beatrix stood in stunned silence.

“I’m a war orphan now, just like your Fiancé.”

How on earth did he know that. It was as if the ghost of the whole recent series of conflicts had taken form and settled upon her best carpet.

Of all the adversaries she had ever faced...

“Please — please forgive Alexandria...”

“I already have.” He replied, keeping rigid eye contact with her with his single eye. His gaze was deep, and intent, and hazel.

“And forgive me...”

This was the adversary she would never best. She had finally met her true match, having walked right through her door, in her own chambers.

“If M’lady pleases...” Jack bowed to her. “....I have brought for you a gift. I wish very much for you to accept it.”

From a small satchel at his side he withdrew a small scarlet orb, about the size of an apple.

“A tribute to you, intrepid Lady!”

Beatrix was both touched and frightened by the words and mannerisms of this resolute and broken child, and moreso by his gift. The orb was a thing of beauty, appearing to be made of glass or gem, completely smooth and perfectly transparent ruby red in color, like a scarlet tear. Inside it moved and flashed a barely detectable but definite source of light.

Everything inside her shrieked at her not to take it from him. Every instinct, innate and trained.

But it was her logic and, strangely, her conscience, that overrode these and made her take it from him. She accepted the object as some inevitable consequence which could not be avoided; with grace.

She was right. The orb broke in her hands. In an instant she was surrounded by a violent and dark swirling, it enveloped her in almost complete silence.

Captain Adelbert Steiner had been watching from the side of the room since Jack had offered her the

gift, and instantly broke his silent observation.

“Beatrix!”

As quickly as the silent blood red whirling wisp around Beatrix had began, it ceased. It ceased so quickly as to dissipate into nothingness before Steiner could reach her.

But he did not reach her.

On the floor in the spot where Beatrix had stood now lay something that could not be Beatrix. There now suffered and writhed a Thing from the very center of the realm that nightmares sprang from.

A mass of boiling, churning, smoldering flesh, covered in open blisters and wounds, scabs and cists. Limbs in no particular order or arrangement and each one horribly disfigured and useless, one vaguely resembling a hand. Holes and passages, some pulsating, some beginning to leech bile or blood onto the floor, one on the head-like mound at its end occupied by a bloodshot but unmistakably familiar autumn-hued eye that frantically darted left and right, and which began streaming blood-diluted tears.

As Steiner’s eyes grew wider, it made eye contact with him, and then from several openings at once the

Thing began to scream.

“What have you done to my Beatrix?” Steiner bellowed at the rat child who was no longer there. All that remained of Jack was an open window, and the fluttering of its rose red curtains in the currents of night air outside it.

And as the Thing screamed, its true voice entered his mind.

“Steiner, help me it hurts! Steiner, please make it stop! It hurts! IT HURTS!”

3. Overtures

— OVERTURES —

Airship El Adrel lay in the basin of the meeting waterways at the edge of the thoroughfare behind Alexandria castle. Her beautiful but formidable iron-hulled presence had been missed in this city for nearly ten years.

Her ram-bowed hull was made of iron plate riveted together and painted true Naval White, with an immense bronze sheathed cutwater and ram plate, highly unusual for a passenger liner. Masts and ventilators of ochre painted ornamental iron and varnished wood superstructure stained in alternating patterns of light and dark. Two funnels behind her midcastle sheathed in polished brass. Three planished steel airscrew masts, two either side aft and one in the center forward, the latter protruding from an iron deckhouse sitting in the middle of a decorative compass rose on the highly varnished foredeck, their airscrews made of blued steel. A long split double bowsprit, more ornamental than practical, one towering up and one pointing right forward and bearing a head lantern. To all who

beheld her lying in port, she was every bit as beautiful an airship as Prima Vista.

Thick smoke billowed from her funnels as the firemen busily got steam up.

The industrious morale of the airship's crew stood in contrast to the manifest she was taking on. Hundreds of tons of supplies of bare essentials. Flour and grain, nonperishable ingredients for bread and simple food, barrels of drinking water and lamp oil and candle wax, candle and lamp wick, anti-toxin and rubbing alcohol, a seemingly endless amount of pre cut Alexandrian quarry stone and timber and smithed lengths of strap iron, hand tools and rope and chain.

The majority of the passengers coming slowly up the gangways were the dusty white rats of Burmecia and, occasionally, Cleyra. Bedraggled and wandering War refugees who had arrived in Alexandria from parts unknown. The stream of them here to board airships was a slow but constant trickle, every single one meekly or tearfully bound for Burmecia, and the standing policy to accept them without payment or ticket. Each ship dedicated to a trip there took on as great a tonnage of relief and supply as she could safely carry.

The rats teemed up the gangways and staircases to the ship like shadows, huddled together, some lagging behind or accompanied by loved ones should they be so lucky. All slow, all discouraged, all in silence fearing what they might see on arrival at their beleaguered kingdom. Very few with any real urgency, most did not speak, even amongst themselves. Only hushed murmurs or gestures indicated any life beyond their simple heed to Home's quiet call.

Among them were passengers for Lindblum, having booked the far cheaper tickets on El Adrel due to the anticipated long stopover time in Burmecia increasing the duration of the planned trip. They grinned and chortled at the prospects of the amenities of El Adrel, small but elegant quarters each with its own washroom with a true prize, hot and cold running water.

The Burmecians and Cleyrans would quietly nod in contrast; occasionally a mother with a child would show a hint of a smile at the prospect of giving their little one a much-needed hot bath.

El Adrel's stout Captain presided over the scene. An immense man in personality and truly every other way except height, Bancroft Ellenroad was a

man of fearsome bristling sideburns, a gigantic ram-bow of a nose similar but less well defined than that of his ship, a broad forehead with a hardened brow, a pair of eyebrows perpetually in a skeptical and frustrated vee and a wide straight mouth all placed upon a gigantic, heavy head.

An old friend of Regent Cid, he had seen much in his years of service aboard and commanding airships, but this was somehow without parallel.

As the procession made its way aboard the airship, he towered ominously over it from the running deck and despite the first mate standing beside him awaiting orders, he remarked more to the air around him;

“The last ‘*short*’ trip this ship embarked upon had turned into a circuitous voyage and was that of the duties of a tender supporting an armada and then of cleaning up the death and damage done by the mad Queen Brahne. By burning lands or the moons falling from the sky, this voyage shall be an *uneventful* one, according to plan and free of distractions.” He emphasized this statement with a firm stomp of his right foot.

El Adrel’s great steam whistle cleared its throat of condensed water, and the airship’s deep and

throaty voice boomed announcement of its departure across the city.

“Get us out of here, mister Bannister! I wish to see the spires of Lindblum over this bow as soon as is aerodynamically possible.” Bancroft bellowed as the gangways began to come up.

The first mate swept the flight engine telegraphs from end to end, and then to the customary seventy revolutions for slow ascent. They shortly rang back from their hefty brass housings as their painted hands darted across their glass faces in response.

As the lift airscrews of the ship began to turn, Adelbert Steiner stepped shakily and unevenly up the last remaining gangway as two crewmen ensured it was not pulled away with him on it. He walked wide eyed and sleepless, the heavy satchel on his back wriggling every so often, its awful, pitiful contents constantly shifting in excruciating pain and misery.

“I will find the one who did this to you, and I will see he puts it right, or pays for it with his nothing less than his life. If need be, I will chase him over the rim of the Sky.”

“Ticket, sir?”

One look from Steiner and the man fell silent.

The white airship lifted herself over the spires of the outer castle turrets and armories and into a purple morning sky. Further telegraph clangs from deep inside her hull and then the bridge, her drive airscrews began to churn the air and over the rooftops of Alexandria she went, slowly gaining speed toward the mountains.

Freya had awoken after an unrestful sleep of tossing and turning.

Her code of honor demanded that she throw herself at the work of rebuilding Burmecia as sir Fratley and all the rest did, but she could not bring herself to leave bed. She tried in vain to return to sleep, but her head churned so with thoughts and emotions she could not even have this small blessing.

She never normally touched coffee, but after a small cup of some of that given to her as a gift by someone she had saved, the gray blurry ache of the morning turned into a stabbing energetic pain that forced her into motion.

The rain had subsided to a drizzle and this made her outward journey far more bearable, but it only remained so until she went past the home of Wei and Kal.

The house was not yet quite fully repaired but was so very beautiful as was everything that surrounded this couple. They had by some means, either Wei's green thumb or potions or both, encouraged the most beautiful colorful flowers and blossoming ivy to grow up their walls and trellises. They had made a proper home for their children, who she caught sight of playing in the streets. Four of them darted about beyond a neighboring courtyard, one trying to hide a brightly colored paper-mache ball from the other three. It took her slightly longer to find the fifth, hiding in plain sight in the flowery front yard of the house, asleep under the natural umbrella of a tree, evidently having worn herself out.

There was something more. As she let what was around her drown out her own inner mess, her sensitive ears became aware of something beautiful, something that pained her greatly and something that had been long unfamiliar to her.

Warm, needy Passion.

She could hear Kal and Wei making love deep in the confines of the house. She could hear it was the kind of absolute and desperate love she once knew.

Maybe that was why the flowers bloomed with such color and vibrance and with such numbers here.

The mess returned and she instantly hurt again. She suddenly found her forepaws were against her mouth. She also found she could not stop herself from weeping. She would poorly stitch her wound at home. Avoiding waking up the sleeping child at any cost, she ran back the way she had come. Until returning home her life had been ceaseless motion with no time for tears, now she barely had time for anything else.

“...I love you, Freya.”

“I meant it when I said I love you, Freya.”

His warmth worked its way into her heart in spite of herself. He had even found ways to make her laugh again, beyond the empty ironic laughter of her misery. And her laughter filled him with greater warmth. And so, slowly, the rhythm of their lost

romance insistently re-asserted itself over the deafening silence that had ruled their lives for so long. The tempo was slightly changed, but the notes, although less of them, were still the same.

With the joys came challenges. Often, repeats of those they had already gone through, to her thrill and chagrin, and his patience. The dynamic of Freya being a war orphan who had to work doubly hard to even stay practiced at her knightly skillset versus Fratley who was in every way the effortlessly shining hope of his Kingdom was not directly present, but echoes of it remained and seemed to still drag on them like an anchor. It even remained in the way others treated them.

Freya often began openly criticizing herself harshly and he comforting her just as had happened so often and so intensely before she had lost him, but the familiarity of this only drew them closer.

Their need for each other was just the same, but their lack of ability to ask for what they themselves needed over the needs of their people and their Kingdom due to the principles of their knighthood slowed their reconnection and frustrated them both. It sent Freya further into depression and often she did not leave the house, getting as much restless

sleep during the day as in the night. And Fratley, after awakening under the eaves of her cistern shed and working the pain and chill out of his body, often had to gently coax her out and encourage her in order for her to begin a day of service to the rebuild effort.

His touch was just the same, but truncated due to his reticence to take advantage of or scare her away just as things between them were beginning to blossom again, and this brought them both a hollow sadness.

Fratley may have been quiet and reserved around Freya for fear of jarring her away from him, but he was as brazen and outspoken and proactive as he had ever been and moreso, around others. He often talked to Wei and Kal, who by fortuitous circumstance were now close enough to be considered neighbors. Wei was sweet in nature and always listened to what he had to say, and all he talked about was Freya, his concerns for her, his devotion to her. When he mentioned Freya's trouble sleeping, Wei had given him a potion to give to her.

She had cautiously downed it one evening some time after Fratley had presented it to her, as she was never one for potions. But it knocked her out cold

and on the morning after the first restful night she could remember in years, she happened to awaken before he did. On her way trudging out of her small yard, she caught him sleeping under the eaves of the cistern shed.

She stopped cold. Her first instinct was to laugh, but that vanished when she saw he had been using her washtub and washboard.

“Fratley —”

He awoke with a start. Disaster, he had not considered all the potential consequences of giving her the sleeping potion.

He sat bolt upright. “Good morning, Freya!”

“Fratley...” She felt tears. “How long?” She asked insistently.

“I know not what you mean.” He attempted to brush off the question. He had always been a terrible liar.

“How long?” She attempted to look at him sternly, and knew she was failing.

“Just last night, I wanted to make sure that the shed roof....”

She began to cry.

He began again, correcting himself shakily. “The last few nights, but no more than that. I was trying to make sure that...”

“Stop it, Fratley.”

He looked up at her sheepishly.

“This isn’t funny.” She sobbed. “It’s been *so cold*. How Long.”

He stayed silent until she opened her mouth to speak again, and then cut her off.

“Since you have blessed this place again with your presence, as a matter of fact. And I shall not leave, for it is my sworn duty to never leave you again, and to protect you, and ensure you are healthy and well and have whatever you wish for close at hand, and I quite doubt I would leave this place even if you demanded I do so, for I shall never again repeat the mistake that I do not remember making.”

Freya fell to her knees.

He had never done this before. In fact he had never done anything remotely like this before, not even at the height of their lost love.

It had somehow grown, even while absent.

“For I mean it when I say I love you, Freya.”

She shuffled to him on her knees, cradled his head in her forepaws quite to his surprise, parted his hair with her muzzle and placed a long kiss on his forehead. She refused to break it for a long time. When she did, he immediately raised his head and kissed back, and looked at her.

“And I will tell you something else.” He said with a newfound confidence that surprised even he. “I love your rare blue eyes. They are as rare and as beautiful as the times our skies clear.”

He had said this exact thing to her long ago, and she responded in the way she had originally, with a long wet kiss that made him gasp with joy.

“I shall continue the rebuild with renewed vigor today, you beautiful creature.” He smiled unrestrainedly at her.

She brimmed with intense happiness and sadness simultaneously. All her life had been spent asking what she could do for others, not once asking for what she needed. The same could be said for him. She felt that had to end here and now.

“Fratley, I need you even more than Burmecia does, just as I did when you vanished away.”

He remained silent, but she knew that expression on his face too well.

“Please come home with me.” She begged.

“I shall. And it would be my greatest pleasure, and you need never ask again.” His face beamed at her all the rest he could not say.

And for the first time since she had lost him, he followed her in through the door, and it shut behind both of them.

She prepared for him a proper breakfast, and for the first time since he had left her, she ate a proper breakfast. And she began fawning over him as she had used to, pointing out every blemish and stain and scar and wrinkle and mark of fatigue he bore, and how it was probably from sleeping outside in the rain. And she instantly noticed his lingering shivers that he vehemently denied the presence of. She responded by wrapping around him in a blanket, and sharing her warmth with him. The way he clung to her gave away how deep the cold had worked its

way into him. She had yearned for him to embrace her like that for so many years, and they did not disengage for hours, even after they had both begun to sweat, as whole and intense warmth was now something as precious as gold to them.

And after they left the blankets they talked, and talked for hours, and she stroked his forepaws and he constantly remarked at how much he loved the closeness and homeliness of her little burrow. As it grew dark outside, they both lit candles and stoked a fire in her fireplace for the first time since her return to Burmecia, and made the inside of that burrow awash in welcoming firelight and life-giving heat. The iron pipes over the fireplace gave the house hot running water again, and they joyfully poured it into her meager assortment of copper pots and pans to make broths and boil vegetables from her stores. They ate a small but wonderful dinner together, their first in many years, and ate it leaning against each other.

“Fratley.”

“Freya.” He fed her a grape.

“There’s hot water. Will you bathe with me?”

He locked up, and her heart sank.

“F-forgive me.” He stuttered, looking intently forward at the glass in his hand, feverishly trying to think of what to say. All of the ease and calmness that had come to him since that morning evaporated. ‘Forgive me, for I do not wish to take advantage of you as I am just getting to know....’ He stopped and realized how horribly untrue and cockeyed what he said had sounded. He frustratedly brought his fist down on the table. “Dammit.”

Damn this hole in his head.

In an instant, Freya was heartbroken again.

The first time they had made love, it had been his idea with her only dropping hints. Brazen Fratley, confident Fratley. Passionate, adventurous, loving Fratley. Where had he gone? The same place the rest of him had gone, into nothingness. When they were a new couple, he had always been the one to pursue her despite her developing feelings first.

This new Fratley was timid *because* of her, because he did not want to lose or offend her, and she loved him for it, but she grieved at the damage done to their relationship.

If only she had never let him leave.

He took her forepaw in his. “But I shall draw your bath.”

She remained sitting and gently pulled at him as he got up, and he began stoking the fire and arranging the bath almost too eagerly to try and make up for his mistake. It was adorable to her, but so saddening.

He folded freshly laundered towels into neat stacks, he arranged soaps and soapstone, he ran the hot tap into the porcelain tub as hard as it would go and warm steam filled the little washroom. When he had finished, with the water still running he bowed to her and extended his arm.

She shook her head and gave him a sad smile, kissed his hand and closed the door.

She sank into the tub in the absolute darkness. The hot water embraced her and the heat instantly began to work its way into her tired joints and aching feet.

She turned that thought over in her head and whispered it out loud, under the rush of running water.

“If only I hadn’t let you leave...”

One thing that did strike her, if this was indeed a new Fratley; he would most assuredly not leave her again.

But how could that bring her any peace. Through the dark and rain she would wander. The sight of him would continue to torment her. Their inability to recapture the entire life lost was unbearable. Her kingdom as it healed became somehow as unfamiliar to her as she was to him. All was crossed, backwards, twisted in knots and inside out.

Her restlessness set in and this time far more dangerously, with no destination ahead of her she set her aching feet to endless motion with no compass to follow, only the stinging thorns of misery jabbing at her back, pushing her left and right, and forward, and over the mountains, forever away from her home.

She found herself treading a wide and blank ice covered river between black, blank foothills in a country she did not recognize. The white flat plain made the world an unpainted canvas, but there was no newness in it. The frigid wind whipped at her back and sensitive ears and tail.

The setting sun of blinding unfamiliar icy winter white shimmered between ragged peaks before it set and pulled its cast light from the land as impatiently as someone drew unclean sheets from a bed.

She was alone, in the dark, upon a field of ice. Everything seemed to stop. Wholly, totally, absolutely stop.

And then it started again, with a sickening crack. How could she have been so stupid, and yet hadn't this been what she sought all along by wandering across an ice sheet of unknown thickness over a river of unknown depth.

The ice yielded under her feet like breaking glass and suddenly she churned and struggled and suffered and gasped in freezing water. All the feeling that stung inside her was suddenly reflected perfectly in physical pain that swirled around her. Her limbs stopped working in the frigid cold, she fought to keep her head above water. Freezing water penetrated her lungs. She cried against the drowning, more in catharsis and for the misery and pain to stop than for help.

They were Wordless cries of sorrow and despair. She felt herself dying, and it was not the relief she had expected. It was scary; it only made her

suffering worse. She would now never have what she wanted. Any chance at this was now gone, the threshold of oblivion was made only of pain. Only one word passed her lips as her face was swallowed by the water.

“Fratley!”

And then she awoke somehow, disoriented, still splashing in cold water, still surrounded by endless darkness. This was what it felt like to leave her body, of course the way of things would be cruel enough that a lonely soul treading the void would feel as an icy river. Maybe it was only that way for her. Her curse continued even after death.

“Fratley!”

Fratley was jarred from his ponderous half-sleep in the old wicker armchair by the sound of splashing and screams. In an instant he was at the washroom door. He did not knock or stop to ask a question, it slammed into the hamper behind it with a crash such was the speed he swung it open.

Freya thrashed and treaded in the water of the tub in the total darkness save the light of the fire from the now open door. As the water went everywhere he felt that it had gone cold.

They had both fallen asleep.

She was drowning as she screamed for him. He had never heard her sound like this, he was sure not even before. He was at her side in an instant.

“Freya, calm, calm! It’s a nightmare, I am here, it’s only a dream!”

She latched to him and kept screaming. He pulled her from the tub.

“I don’t want to leave!” She sobbed. “It hurts so much, I don’t want to leave! Don’t let me leave — please help me!”

Fratley wrapped her in his arms and them both in the largest of the cotton towels; giving her back the warmth she had given him before, and carried her to bed. When they reached it, she would not let go.

4. Jack of Hearts

— JACK OF HEARTS —

“Its my first time away from home!” -Jack

“Sir Fratley, I don’t think I can live on my own — not without you.” -Freya

Freya slowly came awake surrounded on all sides but one by soft familiar bedding, and pressed down into it by an equally familiar warm weight. Fratley shifted softly on top of her.

This was how they had always slept together. She had missed this so indescribably.

She drew her arms and legs and tail around him and began to kiss him awake.

He slowly fluttered his eyes open and instantly began to smile. He tried to speak but couldn’t due to the assault of kisses that grew stronger when he opened his mouth. He pressed down against her in response and she gasped.

“Fratley, I don’t think I can live on my own — not without you.” Freya repeated underneath him.

“Then you shall not.” Fratley responded with a powerful kiss.

The morning light streaming through the small window made their hair glisten, and made a miniature cosmos out of the floating dust in the air.

For the first time since her devastation at knowing he lived without his memory of their life together, she was flooded with hope for building one with him anew.

Jack hid panting in the lee of a roof in a damaged alleyway. He wished he could enjoy being in Burmecia again.

It was his first time home since fleeing with his family during the Alexandrian attack, but even if the pain put on his broken body by the stresses of teleportation from Alexandria castle had not been present, his broken heart gave him the same if not greater pain.

After the better part of an hour recovering, and drying his face, he threw his hood up to keep the

rain off his tender wounds and set off into the streets. It did not take him long to reach his next goal, so well aimed was the endpoint of the teleportation spell he had nearly died using.

He caught sight of Sir Fratley in a break in the rain. His tall and well defined self stood out against the small crowd of others and the rope lashed scaffolding as he worked tirelessly to rebuild a row of damaged stone dwellings along the street on which Jack tread.

Jack's broken heart beat painfully in his chest. He stood there for a moment, watching Fratley, shuffled his feet and resisted tears as he looked at the stones. Eventually they began to fall, and blended with the rain droplets, a blessing given to him by the skies of his home. He drew breath shakily, each time trying to stop his weeping and succeeding after the fourth try. He slowly stepped over to the edge of the restoration site and hoisted himself atop an ancient wagon piled with freshly cut stone waiting to be used. There he sat, and there he waited.

Each member of the party came to get stone and took barely any notice of him; he shifted dutifully out of the way if they needed a block he sat on. Otherwise he sat as still as the rest of the wagonload.

When it came Fratley's turn, Jack spoke up.

"Sir Irontail..."

Fratley turned his head to look at him.

"What can I do for you?" He asked with his usual earnest sincerity.

Here he was breaking his back in the rain to help rebuild the destroyed houses of others only because his code of conduct demanded he do so, and yet he still had all the time in the world for a rain soaked child. Same old Fratley, memory or not.

Jack drew another shaky breath.

"What ever is the matter?" Fratley asked, drawing closer.

Jack abruptly moved to Fratley and drew him into the most powerful hug his small good and bad arms could muster, his hood dropping as he did so.

"Thank goodness you're alive, *you're really alive.*" Jack openly began to cry. He buried his head into Fratley's chest.

"Young Jack!" He exclaimed. "I feared that you...." The words died in his mouth as he examined the small boy.

Of course Fratley remembered him. This only made him cry harder.

Fratley looked down in horror at Jack's injuries.

"We *must* get you to an infirmary *immediately*." Fratley insisted.

"No." Jack smiled through his tears. "Of all my wounds, these you see hurt me the least."

Fratley felt Jack's hug tighten. He would take Jack to the best doctor or nurse he could find whether he wanted to go or not, but at the moment all he could do was reciprocate this affection.

Jack did not release his grasp when he stated, "Sir Irontail, I must speak with you, it's a matter of great importance."

Fratley restrained his reflexes in his response. Jack had an eloquence and an urgency in his eyes completely uncharacteristic of a child, even the war victims he had seen thus far.

"How may I be of help?"

Jack lead Fratley by the hand cautiously away until he found a nearby shed that was rain-tight but still abandoned, and there he sat him down, and refused to let go of his forepaw. Before Fratley could

say anything, Jack again began to cry, and pour out what was in him.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for me and my family. You tried so hard to save mum and my little brother, you did your very best. I wanted you to win so badly...”

Fratley remembered as well, as it was one of very few memories he now had, and one which pained him endlessly.

“I felt so safe with you, so did Adam, so did Mama. I wish you could have stayed with us, but I’m glad you didn’t because you’d have been killed too, and Freya needs you.”

“How do you know...” Fratley began to ask

Jack interrupted him. “You must promise me something.”

“Anything within my power.” Fratley felt compelled to say.

“You promise me that you will care for your beautiful Freya, and never forget her or leave her again.”

Fratley’s response stuck in his throat, and his chest tightened.

“I have a gift I beg you to accept. Please consider it a debt of gratitude to you, sir Knight.”

Jack withdrew an emerald green orb from the small satchel at his side. Fratley was immediately captivated by its beauty. It was the color of calm tropical seas in legends of paradise, as transparent as a teardrop and it shimmered from within like starlight, with a hint of iridescence.

Fratley gently took it in his forepaw and worked his fingers to turn it over, as his other one was still clasped in Jack’s. As he took hold of the glassy orb, he found it warm to the touch, which surprised him. The shimmer inside seemed to magnetically move against the limits of its inner walls and concentrate at the points where his hand touched it, and toward his heart, and he swore he could feel a physical pull toward him, as if the object was trying to fly from his hand and toward his upper body.

“What is....” Fratley began, but stopped himself. He felt he was in the presence of something sacred which demanded his whole respect, and that even questioning its nature would somehow be disrespectful.

“I shall treasure this forever.” He half-whispered. He felt a great finality once this passed his lips.

“Yes, you will.” Jack beamed up at him with a smile that made his half-face look almost complete again. “And now, thanks to you, I have almost fulfilled what I set out to do. I am a fortunate one indeed. I must leave for Cleyra as soon as I can, it will be a very long journey.”

“But my young friend, Cleyra was destroyed!”

“I know.”

Jack leaned toward Fratley and hugged him again, and took the forepaw that he held in his and gave it a long kiss.

“I will miss you.”

Jack abruptly rose, and released Fratley’s forepaw that still tingled from his gesture. This warmth distracted him from the duller sensation of the Orb in his opposite forepaw getting hotter, and beginning to vibrate. Jack made quickly for the door.

“Jack, wait! I —”

The Orb in Fratley’s grasp exploded in a shower of emerald green, and rainbow. The entire shed lit up and the rain falling around it became droplets suspended in the air. Aurora Borealis streamed from the open door and broken window, and cascaded

along the lines of mortar and puddles of water between the stones of the street, and up the ivy of the walls of the neighboring buildings. It was as gentle as it was intense. All this occurred in complete silence.

Jack watched for a moment in awe, and then scampered away.

The shed, in fact the entire world around him, had disappeared from his senses. Fratley looked up into a warm tunnel of light and feeling, the End of which seemed impossibly far away and bore the sublime characteristic rainbow iridescence of oil trickled upon the surface of water on a sunny day.

He knew, without knowing how he knew, that this was the furthest distance he had ever or would ever gaze across, and that this End he peered at was something the wisest in all the world sought their entire lives just to catch a glimpse of, and rarely succeeded in doing.

That End did not move toward him nor did he move toward it, but from it across the impossible distance came to him wisps of itself equally resplendent, as if it were shedding tears. They drifted down like feathers, hundreds of them. When

the first settled on his heart, it exploded into him what had been so long missing.

Memory.

With this warm explosion came the faces of his parents and the feeling of security in their arms and his favorite hiding places. His first memories, and his memories of remembering them.

Another wisp from that far away unknown place came to him and deposited its warmth into him.

This brought with him his first memory of experiencing laughter.

Another.

This brought with it the first time he had ever tasted a dead pepper and spit it out as his grandfather laughed.

One by one the gentle kindnesses from Afar fell on him. Each one bringing with it precious gift of memory, remembrance, completeness, wholeness. What was missing was gently, painfully, wonderfully returned. The rate and quantity of the Stuff being shed upon him steadily increased. Touch after touch, piece by piece, his life swirled back into form inside of him.

No longer in order in terms of time, but in the order he so desperately needed. Smells and tastes and touch came first and laid the foundation for more complex and nuanced experiences of places, people, things and situations.

His fruitful and satisfying childhood, his tendency to ponder, his early thirst for adventure and the trouble it often brought him. His terrible sense of self doubt that set upon him in his teenage years when he found out that his body was not, in fact, unbreakable, and in stark contrast, when he became acutely aware of the discomfort he instilled in others by being adept at nearly everything he tried save cooking.

And then, catalyzed partly by that memory, with a burst of inner summer's warmth came Freya. The memories of her erupted and blossomed into him like spring foliage after a rainy season, so intensely it hurt him.

How she had caught his eye the moment she appeared before him for her Novitiate. How he had become quietly smitten with her during that delicious time, and how she became very un-quietly smitten in return. How it felt to be young and

healthy without a care beyond honing their skills together and being in each other's company.

How it felt to mutually progress past the initial flirtatious inconsequential stages of merely finding her adorable, something that took he far longer than it took her, and fall deep into love with her as he discovered more about her.

The way he was forced to resist his instincts to wrap himself around her when he learned her early life and family were casualties of the recent war, and how she had essentially no prospects whatsoever being born into a small family with a largely unspoken last name, and how this bleak prospect was now cemented by her having no living family left, and the way she was trying to transcend and live a meaningful life despite having difficulty mastering even the simplest of tasks.

How she struggled to remember to properly prepare her dress and armor, how it took her much longer and considerably more effort than the usual Novitiate to learn to handle any of the basic blades or the Burmecian shortspear. How she got overheated easily in summer, and how she would become cold and shiver on a brisk autumn day that he and others would barely notice. How her first

high jump ended with her shrieking in pain from a broken ankle and how he set it for her. How he endlessly fawned over her and offered encouragement, and the ceaseless taunts and shaken heads and hushed discussions in archways it began to instill in the Dragon Knighthood.

How he had become infatuated with her rare vibrant blue eyes, a color highly unusual in their people.

How she had reacted when he revealed his admiration of this and other facets of her beauty.

And how she had reacted when he revealed his feelings for her, and his own intense joy when she quietly, tearfully reciprocated them.

How it felt to make love with her soft body and beautiful soul, how it felt to twist around her in bed and how good she tasted and smelled. How he and he alone was able to bring a fluttering smile across her face and a shimmer to those soulful blue eyes. How he had lovingly helped her reach orgasm for the first time. How they chased each other, how they caught each other, how they yearned and writhed for each other no matter how physically close they pressed and the promises they made buried in the blankets. How he delighted in the discovery that she

was intensely ticklish, and how he delighted in becoming addicted to the laughter and sounds she made when he took advantage of this.

How her laughter was an intense but rare thing that only he had ever been able to bring forth...

How they had kept this a secret for some time as the fable of the Novitiate falling in love with her mentor was equal parts clichéd and traditionally inappropriate. How her heart and will had strengthened from his love and touch and presence in her life, and how her progress then eclipsed any she had made before and seemed as then a blur. How upon announcing their feelings for each other within trusted circles, they were met with accolades as she was no longer Novitiate unmolded, but a skilled fighter, a virtuous and trusted and gentle-spoken Lady, the very first Lady in service in the military or as a knight of any capacity in Burmecia; an asset to the Kingdom and the pride of King and country.

And then began coming to him the completeness of his life. With each wisp now came the missing threads to bind the tapestry of his life together.

And then came the shame and regret.

The unforgiveable, awful, unforgettable misery he had wrought upon the one he loved, and how he would have stopped had she demanded he stay, and how he knew she wouldn't for the virtuous and selfless nature he instilled in her. How he had sewed the seeds for the destruction of her and his own happiness for something as broad and fleeting as King and Country.

How he had arrogantly and foolishly deluded himself that the actions of one man with a spear from an ancient and unchanged kingdom awash in rain eternal could have made a difference upon the stage of the Wide World at large or turned the tides of Time, and stilled the hand of Kingdoms that made ships that could navigate the skies, or those that possessed the ability to control deep magic and powerful things beyond the realms and understanding of men and beast.

How she had confessed her truest heart to him and told him that she could not make do without him close at hand, and how he had replied with cold and empty and stale words unbecoming his love for her. How she had fallen to the ground as he walked away. How he should have asked her at the very least to accompany him upon his fool's errand, and how he had broken the one empty and outlandish

promise he had made to her: To come back. Even when he had come back, he had not truly. Not until this exact moment, and not due to his own skill, or volition, or sense of honor.

The warm light continued to pour into him.

“To what corners of the world have you travelled?”

And then came the horror of what he had endured at the outer reaches of his lonely fools errand. How pining and heartache and an unsure nomadic course had lead him across oceans to the edge of the world and beyond it. How there, past the Great Fall, then the Great Fold, across the Great Dark Gap and then beyond the Great Sweep of Horizon and Azimuth he had found himself in a dark and alien Chasm that stretched ever onward underneath unfamiliar fast-moving stars, in a realm beyond where color reached. And how in passage through that glassy sided chasm, searching ever onward as it stretched, at that point only to try and find his way back to the world, he had come upon that border past which memory could not reach and had not known it. A towering translucent wall spanning the chasm and sky above it, silent and pensive.

How he had braved it the way he had foolishly braved all other things under the guise of a Dragon Knight, and this in a place where the name Burmecia, and the name Fratley, and the idea of Knight, or love or even memory no longer had a meaning.

How with fear in his heart he had outwardly spoken words of encouragement to himself and how those words had been swallowed by the air around him before reaching his ears, for even sound held no domain there. And how with an outward audacity maintained as if the eyes of his King were always watching him, he braved the barrier.

The warm passage above him to where the sublime and loving wisps were coming from, the passage to a place far beyond where that otherworldly chasm stretched, had faded and he could no longer see its iridescent End. He could only see the worn and dusty thatched ceiling and beams of the old shed and the last remnants of the aurora of that fading Blessing, but down still drifted the last few feathery rainbowed wisps. He desperately savored them in his eyes and memory as they drifted toward him in the way prayers were made by children, but he was now gutturally afraid, for he now knew what these last touches from that far off

Source bore. He became aware of the sound of his own weeping, the echo of the last time he heard it drawing ever nearer...

And now came the memories of all of his memories being torn from him, the last memories he had ever held and yet still not been allowed to keep.

How in that black and distant chasm he had braved the barrier and instantly regretted it. The feeling of each of these memories, now just regained, being ripped asunder from his body and mind and heart and spirit, some in clusters and fistfuls, some in tatters and long tendrils, some all at once and some horrifically slowly. He re-lived the loss of each memory, each experience, each face, each emotion, each Sacred and deep-kept thing that he, like any other living, thinking, feeling creature was sure until that moment it was impossible to have separated from him.

With each wisp that erupted into him now came a memory of a memory torn, ripped, peeled away from him no matter how hard his feeble self had tried to hold it. How they had escaped his grasp frictionlessly, like trying to grab light. How he had screamed and torn at the barrier, and then his own face and body trying to stop it to no avail. How he

had looked for some malevolence to blame within the barrier but found only indifference, and presence, and how he was forced to reckon with the nature of things beyond his narrow understanding of the world while all this pain was inflicted upon him, all these things were taken from him pitilessly.

And then the shed was empty save one more drifting, weightless, iridescent form. And now he struggled and gnashed his teeth and tore at himself and the earth around himself *just as he had* on the cold and alien rock of that dark and distant chasm and the wrong side of that silvery cosmic barrier stretching across it. For he knew what this last precious, awful fragment of himself bore. He tried to be away from it for fear of the pain he knew was coming. He could not handle it. He could not go through this, not again. Not a knight ten times as strong and resolute as he could bear a second time this torment. The wisp of light gently followed his struggling form through the air on invisible currents of Aether ever toward him. It continued to him as his aching back drew up against the stone wall. He cowered and sobbed as it did. His tears blurred it in his vision. He tried to swat it away, to no avail. It made slowly, directly for his Heart. He shut his eyes before it made contact.

And then erupted into him the memory of the loss of the memories, and feelings, and meaning of his precious Freya. For this was the last thing the barrier had syphoned out of him, the thing he had held onto more desperately than all the others.

Freya, Freya –Freya!

He had bargained and pleaded with the great un-listening presence to leave him only with this most sacred remnant of who he was and who he needed, he had squirmed and writhed and shrieked and toiled upon that black glassy ground that all else be taken from him *before* the memories of her, so he might hold onto Freya just a little bit longer, and that robbery might stop before even the last remnant of her was taken from his soul. But it didn't, and she had been. He screamed her name and the Chasm *ate* it, as the shimmering silver-gray barrier had eaten the rest of her. And the feeling of everything that was her, and his life with her, and his love for her, and his promise to her, being ripped from him, had been so awful it had torn out a piece of his Soul with it, the part of him that clung to her most tightly. And though he had now regained it, with it he had regained this incomprehensible feeling of its loss and for a moment he wished to forget it all again just

to be rid of this torment as he cried on the floor of the shed, for now it would not cease.

He cried for her, he screamed her name as he had in that fearsome and Empty place beyond the Horizon, over and over. And now instead of it being devoured in the air just past his lips, it rang over the falling rain and echoed in the gloomy street and against the walls of the war-torn buildings. And he kept screaming.

And like a final blessing, she was at his side in an instant. And wordlessly, as he screamed for her despite her smothering him in her kisses and her bosom, she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt what had happened, and she too began to cry.

Fratley wound himself around Freya as a thread around a spool. His screams, which had flowed in her absence, now ebbed in her presence.

“My Freya —” He sobbed. “I cannot be without you.”

She had to prove it. She had to be without doubt. Trying many times to form speech through her cries, she finally was able to ask him a question.

“Wh — when you — when was the first time I wore this — and why did I wear it?” Her tail had

already coiled around him, and she took and held the small orange ribbon at its end against his chest.

“I — I first saw you wear it when you came to meet me at the inner gate of Burmecia, wh — when I — the day I...” He momentarily lapsed into heavy sobs. Bringing himself to utter the action he was most ashamed of stabbed at him. She pressed the orange ribbon of her tail against him harder with her forepaw, demanding the complete answer. “When I *left you behind* —” Those words caught in his throat.

“And you wore it because that is a piece of the ribbon — that our people’s poor wives tie around their gates and trees when they are *widowed!*”

It was true, he had finally returned to her, and he had answered a question that had been unanswered and burning in her mind since he had left her, for she never knew if he had noticed that she’d worn it on that horrible day.

“H — How could I *not* have noticed?”

“How could you have noticed, and taken your leave anyway!”

She tore the ribbon to scraps between them.

Now it was her turn to shriek pitifully, and she buried herself in him and did so with emotions that overpowered even his.

He had been given the blessing of forgetfulness and the pain had been dulled, while all this time she had born its weight.

How could he have left me like this...

“F — Fratley I...” She could not speak through her tears.

All that time spent searching for him, missing him, aching and breaking for want of him. It had broken her somewhere deep inside, it was now all she felt she knew. She had to be the rational one for all those around her come what may, on top of the ever-present loneliness. She had to give good council; she had to be other’s strength and guidance when she so painfully needed it herself from someone who was not there. The cracks in her soul finally opened and out poured all the misery and grief and poison this way of living had grown inside her.

She screamed into the folds of his clothing and pressed her forehead up underneath the arch of his chin. She clawed at his hands and arms to hold her tighter. Her voice cracked against the despair.

Each time a wave crashed against her shore she convulsed. When it began to subside and cries turned to gasps, it suddenly renewed and poured forth again stronger yet.

Fratley clung to her even harder than he had tried to cling to his memories of her as they were taken from him, and she clung back.

He understood everything she was trying to silently say. With his memory had returned the familiarity of their love language.

He wrapped around her completely until she could no longer be seen.

How could I have left her like this...

Here he had been with her and even while trying to be close to her again, he had been so passively disconnected from how she felt, he was astounded at how all this pain could ever have been locked inside any one being for so long without it turning her spirit and body to dust. And more astounded, and appalled at how her pain had not cut through him when they had touched and returned his memory by its own power alone. He and only he had left her so alone, and this was his punishment.

“I’m so, so sorry....” It stuck in his throat.

She looked up at him, angrily, pleadingly.

He drew back, kissed her forehead and did not release the kiss. She pushed against his kiss and closed her eyes against torrents of tears.

He had done this to them both. It was now his duty to put it right.

He held her to him for a long time, long after she quieted. When the trembling weakness in his legs finally lessened, he gathered her up and carried her home.

“Your beautiful feet are weary and world-worn, you shall no longer tread on them.”

In the candle lit sanctuary of her — of their — little home, she began to pour out all she had yearned to say for so many years, and he took her face gently in his forepaws and gazed intently into her eyes in order to better listen to her.

“I looked for you, I looked for this for so long. I walked this empty world wide to find what love felt like again. I haven’t felt love since you left me alone.”

He kissed her.

“I preserved those memories. I kept them but they grew stale, almost like they weren’t even my own”

He kissed her again.

“I missed you *so much*. When I found you and you didn’t remember me, I wished to die. I kept wishing that from then to now.”

He pressed his forehead against hers and shut his eyes.

He lovingly washed every part of her and mouthed on her as they held each other close. He was alarmed at how thin and bony she had become, failing to eat for want of him and eternally travelling light, never stopping to give herself what she needed. Still, she was somehow as soft and lovely as he remembered.

As he remembered...

She rediscovered his body and he re-rediscovered hers, and helped her remember just how good she was capable of feeling. She had forgotten this with the same absolution he had forgotten everything else.

“Fratley I can’t live on my own, not without you.”

He replied by silencing her with a kiss far harder than any he had given her before.

He lovingly stroked her where she was most sensitive and followed there with kisses. He was silently disquieted as he discovered her unfamiliar scars and blemishes in the candle light, she had been hurt so many times since he had left her. But she squirmed in his grasp and squeaked, and he lost himself in the whole of her again.

He was delighted to find she was still as ticklish as ever. Her breasts were cloudsoft and sensitive and he dwelt there longer than anywhere else and worshipped, and listened to her heartbeat. Every kiss and gentle pull and tug and push there sent her breathing heavily. He had always been shamelessly addicted to her bosom.

She began to attack him with a new boldness and found that indeed he too was ticklish in certain places, and took full advantage of it. They frolicked together in her welcoming bed and soon became a twisted mass of entangled white limbs and noses and tails. He pinned her to the bed and she joyfully thrashed against his body and begged for him.

With every move they made he worked his way into her. He thrust and she thrust back, they fit together. They glued to each other.

The love they had made the night before had been wonderful and had set her heart to beating again, but this was very different. Satisfaction of every old desire and the resolution to every last one of her searches was to be found here. This was sacred and desperate and intense, the bed they nested into felt close to the Origin of Love itself.

Neither of them lasted long and she came first and explosively, as she always did. This set him off and he drove her into the bedding, breathing hard in release. Before his breathing had even calmed, he had fallen asleep. She kissed up into him and followed suit very quickly.

She had finally found him, the drawn circle of her life was now complete and there could finally be rest for her heart.

5. Rim of the Sky

— RIM OF THE SKY —

Despite all that had happened, the inner gate of Burmecia stood proudly and beautifully in the constant deluge from the sky. Today it was more of a merciful trickle. The long-eared guard in its Southern turret was brought out of intent concentration upon his game of Solitaire by a now familiar noise.

The beating of airscrews and the muffled pounding of steam engines entered his sensitive, finely tuned white ears, accompanying a great dark form that brought itself forth from the fog of rain.

With a grin, he turned and shouted downward; “An airship approaches!”

El Adrel gingerly set her bulk down on the blocks in the stone yard where Prima Vista had briefly been the week before, with a much larger load than that ship had borne. Her screws had not stopped turning before Steiner alighted upon the drenched stones

down a rope ladder with his awful burden. Into town he raced, his tin boots clacking on the stone path.

Every soul he encountered, he hurriedly introduced himself and demanded to know the identity and whereabouts of Jack. Each response was sincere but more or less the same, a shrug, raised arms, shaken heads, and each time, Steiner's demands grew louder, more hurried, and more heated.

Eventually, unable to stop himself, he found himself shouting in the midst of a gathered crowd of Burmecians, to the point where some of the men were deliberately standing between he and their wives.

“The order of Pluto demands to know the identity and whereabouts of a young transgressor, he must answer for grave crimes against Alexandria!”

After all that had happened, no one of the white rats wished to step forward and confront the Alexandrian lest old familiar hateful passions be instantly re-ignited, but the tension grew to a boil until a diminutive brown figure clad in red rushed forth.

“Lord Puck!” The crowd was stilled and awash in murmur.

“Leave these people alone, they’ve all been through enough!”

“And who are you?” Steiner demanded.

The collective silence of the crowd was louder than the rain hitting Steiner’s tin helmet. How could he not know?

“I’m Puck!” He jumped in reply. “Who are you?”

“I am Captain Adelbert Steiner, first of the Knights of Pluto of Alexandria Castle, protector of Queen Garnet Raza Alexandros the Seventeenth!”

“That’s cool! But what is it you want? There are a few Jacks here.”

“The Jack I search for is a young war orphan with heavy injuries, bandages and a cloak.”

Puck pondered, one brown forepaw under his chin. He did remember Jack. “Yes, I believe I know the Jack you mean. He was a bit younger than me, he was the son of Dan and Learie and had a little brother, I used to play with him at the fountain all the time before your kingdom attacked us! What do you want him for?” Puck felt very suddenly there

was something of great importance just beyond the grasp of his mind.

“He has committed a serious crime against Alexandria that he will answer for.”

“Crime?”

“He has destroyed the fair swordswoman Beatrix!”

Puck raised an eyebrow. Destroyed... The thought did not leave as words. He looked at the wet stone under Steiner’s boots, lost in thought. Suddenly his eyes went wide and that important thing came into his grasp.

He had seen Jack and his family in Cleyra.

In a moment of horror and clarity, a million possibilities flooded Puck’s vision, and in that moment he somehow knew Steiner intended something worse than punishment for his missing friend, whom he had already thought lost to him.

A protective instinct welled inside him which he had only felt once before, and had almost forgotten.

“It sounds like he’s been punished enough!” Puck declared, instantly echoed by murmurs of agreement from the crowd.

Puck bolted away from the crowd without a further word to Steiner. The knight attempted to give chase, but the rats around him barred his way. He demanded an explanation and was on the verge of drawing his sword.

“After all that has just happened, an Alexandrian would again raise his sword against our people?” One of the Burmecian soldiers cried, “How could a knight of your supposed prestige not know that Puck is our King?”

Puck scampered through his home as fast as his short legs would allow. Everywhere he went he was greeted with adoration and concern, and each time he asked for Jack, the son Dan and Learie. Everyone he asked answered either with no knowledge of him, or a sudden pang of painful memory and the same response. His whole family had died with Cleyra’s tree. He thought of how to ask the question in greater detail but could not. He gave the same response in every case; that there was a Knight from Alexandria looking for him, and to not tell him anything under orders from their King.

Each time, he ran faster and faster, until he ran headlong into Kal.

Kal thought for only a moment and noted he had heard from the guard at the outer gate something of a lone young one in a hooded cloak and a very badly injured forepaw leaving Burmecia.

By the time Puck reached the outer gate, his feet were bloodied.

Gray, the guard manning the gate was horrified and jumped down from his turret at the sight of Puck trailing bloody footprints and out of breath. Puck silenced him and demanded to know about what Kal had told him. After several tries, Gray echoed the story in greater detail.

“Didn’t you stop him?” Puck panted. “At least to ask him where his parents were, or where he was going?”

“He said his parents were dead, so I let him pass...”

“Pass to *where*?” Puck jumped up and down on the spot.

“To Cleyra, my lord. He said he had business there!”

Cleyra was a burnt stump, what kind of business could that possibly have been. Puck's head spun.

"Thank you Gray, please keep up the good work!" He saluted, and ran beyond the gate before Gray could object, into the Wide, Wide world.

Freya stayed wrapped around her lover as they wrestled with each other. Nothing would draw them apart today. They had woken up happy and intended to express it. The little stone house had not had laughter in it for five years, and neither had Freya's soul.

They rolled over and over each other as one joined form. No matter how tightly they drew together it was never close enough. Her vision and touch was filled only with him, and his with her in the kind, dim light.

Their play and motion ebbed and flowed.

During a tired ebb, she pulled back to ask the question that had been slowly burning on her tongue since she had awoken.

"Fratley, how?"

He raised an eyebrow.

“How did you regain your memory?”

He smiled with such intensity that he squinted. He had been too focused on her to remember to tell her and in fact to even remember how himself. All he knew now, or ever cared to know, was her and the bed they shared.

She understood all this from his expression.

“Give me a moment to remember.”

Freya’s eyes widened for a moment at this response, and then shut as she *erupted* in laughter.

He only realized what he had said after his ears rang with her joy. Fratley lovingly grasped her face in his forepaws and drank in that laughter, and soon became caught in its current, and his then magnified hers.

He had first fallen in love with her over her laughter.

“There’s my Freya.” He nuzzled her. She sucked his nose into her mouth.

They lay in silence for a time, and then his eyes brightened.

“Jack, the son of Dan and Learie.” Fratley finally answered her. “I regained my memory with his help.”

At this remark, the Joy left Freya’s face. Surely he was mistaken; the entire family had burned on Cleyra.

“Oh....they have a son now!” Fratley backstepped through his newly recaptured library of memory. The last time he had seen Dan and Learie, they were happy newlyweds without any offspring. “That’s...”

The words died in his mouth. He had seen the family together at Cleyra with two children.

Cleyra’s tree suddenly burned and vanished in his mind, as it had all around him.

And then came the image of only half of Jack, the one he had seen only the day before. The fallen cloak, the destroyed and burnt little body, the half-face, and the half-life that the soul living in that broken body had told him of.

Fratley choked.

Freya instantly knew there was something more to his misery.

“What, Fratley?”

He opened his mouth, and closed it again.

“*Tell me!*”

He was stone-faced. It was the same expression she had seen in him when he was preparing to leave Burmecia long ago and it terrified her.

“You *must*.” She pleaded.

He began to silently weep, something she had never seen him do before yesterday.

“If I told you, it would hurt you. I do not wish to hurt you again. Our joy never seems meant to last.”

Freya’s emotions got the better of her, as they had been since her return.

“Fratley, I became even closer with Dan and Learie after you left. I loved their children. I *must know* if any of that family survived Cleyra.”

Fratley bit his lip, more for knowing how what he had to say would affect her than the thing itself.

“He almost didn’t. He’s hurt.”

“By the *gods!*” Freya gasped. “We must go find him, at once! Destiny has finally been kind, thank

the gods little Jack remains on the surface of this world with us, I must ensure this debt repaid ten fold, for with this gift to you he has restored my life to me!”

Fratley took her forepaw very tightly in his.

“Freya, he is *very badly* hurt. His survival is beyond my understanding. You must prepare yourself before you ever saw him.”

This silenced her.

“How did he do it?” She asked.

“Survive? I do not know.”

She shook her head. “I do not understand, how ever did a little one so injured ever restore to you all that you had lost?”

Fratley gazed at her but in doing so, stared right through her, lost in thought. “I — I do not know that either — but it was not he who actually helped me.”

He paused briefly.

“Jack bestowed upon me a gift most beautiful and resplendent, it was as a teardrop, the color of warm oceans I had long since passed on my journeys. It gave me back —”

His gaze through her furthened, as if looking across an impossible distance as his mind slowly worked. He furrowed his brow.

“No — no not *it*.” He continued. “Not *it* at all. *It* merely opened a door to somewhere...” His voice trailed off.

“Somewhere?” Freya asked.

“Something.” He responded wistfully, in a tone that was another first for him. “Something, somewhere so far away. Further away than anything or anywhere. Further than I am sure you, or I, or any has ever travelled. I knew what it was then as I gazed upon it, but now no longer.”

Part of her ached to tell him how far she had travelled, but that was unimportant at this moment and something deep within her told her without a shadow of a doubt he was still correct.

“Fratley...” Freya whispered after a long pause. Only now did she begin to comprehend the gravity of what he was trying to tell her.

“What did it look like?” She asked with an insatiable curiosity, and his reply was immediate.

“It looked like our love for each other. It was the same color.”

Freya bit her lip.

“Where did it dwell?” She asked, her voice quavering.

Fratley was silent for a time, and she hung on his silence.

Without any motion of his eyes, his gaze shifted from through her to at her.

“Where all things originate.”

She opened her mouth, and no sound came. She felt as if she had delicately probed into Old secrets. What he spoke of lay far beyond the First Crystal, which was but a teardrop shed from this Source.

“It was from there that my memory returned to me.”

She traced the outline of his face with her fingers, and pressed her forehead to his.

“And with it my whole world.” Freya finished.

“...Do you think we might too dwell there some day, you and I...”

Freya gulped and clung tighter to him. “I hope so, Fratley, forever and always...”

“I want to. I would twist deep with you to the center of that warm and lovely place.”

“Anywhere I am becomes there so long as we are *never* parted.”

“I love thee, Freya...”

She tucked her head beside his and hugged herself to him. “And I thee, my sweetest treasure.”

They rolled over each other again and she drove him into the bedding. Seeing he was again headed into a deep doze, she put her lips to his ear and whispered.

“I *must* see Jack.”

He nodded to her. They both made to raise themselves from the bed but they were prevented from separating by a firm tug. Their bodies betrayed them, their tails had corkscrewed tightly around each other and one would not untwist from the other. They remained this way despite their tries to loosen them.

“I meant it when I said I’m never letting go of you again.” He whispered as he gently ran his

fingers between their tails, which involuntarily tightened in reaction any attempt to loosen them.

“The old you didn’t say that.” She replied quietly.

“The old me did the opposite.” He stopped trying to undo his tail from hers.

He had indeed changed. If there were any doubt in her mind remaining, it was now washed out. He had grown. She no longer looked back at him, or a ghost of him.

Since he left her she had been looking at him in perpetual past tense even after she had regained him in two ways. Now no longer; she had wanted back the Fratley of the past but here was something far better, a Fratley in future tense.

One who picked her above all else.

Four lovers talked in the break in the rain, Wei and Kal on one side of the garden fence of their home, Freya and Fratley on the other, leaning on the old boards.

“Sir Iron tail, I am immensely gratified you have finally been fully returned to us.” Kal beamed.

“So you see now, why we must find Jack.” Freya finished with conviction.

“Of course.” Wei nodded. “We just can’t believe he’s still alive. And do you know, there is a knight from Alexandria here who said he was looking for him, too! Everyone I’ve met has been talking about it.”

“I don’t like the idea of Alexandrian knights here, most of us still don’t trust them.” Kal added.

Freya and Fratley looked at each other, and then at Wei.

“A knight of Alexandria?” Freya asked, excitedly.

“Yes, he arrived on the airship, the one that’s here now! He’s been the talk of the town, and quite intent on his goal. They say he’s big and has a big scowl, I guess he’s so intent on finding Jack that he’s made himself a bit of a nuisance.”

Freya’s eyes almost closed from the force of her grin. “Steiner!”

“Why would he be looking for Jack?” Fratley asked.

She whirled to Fratley. “Fratley, I wish to introduce you to the most honorable Knight I’ve ever known!”

Fratley smirked and slightly tilted his head.

She abruptly put her hands to her mouth. “Second most —”

He intensified his mock glare and she was sent laughing. “Hush, you know what I meant!”

“You think you know this man?” Kal asked.

“Yes and I wish for you to know him too.” Freya responded.

Kal crossed his arms. “I have children now, Freya. I don’t want anyone or anything near them who I don’t explicitly trust. People like him almost took me away from my wife and almost caused five little ones to grow up fatherless.”

“Steiner was the only Alexandrian bearing arms who was on our side when everything went so badly. I will explain everything to you after we have found Jack, I promise.”

“Anyone Freya chooses as a friend must also be a friend of ours.” Wei took Kal’s forepaw.

“Can you tell us where we might find him?” Fratley asked.

“The last place we saw him was in the main thoroughfare near the airship, but everyone you meet out there will know better.”

Freya and Fratley thanked the married couple profusely and Freya bounded away eagerly. Fratley followed her, but was again lost in thought. Something about all this suddenly seemed odd to him.

It did not take long to find her old tin-clad friend. After a frustrated shopkeeper had told she and Fratley what alleyway he had gone down, Freya found Adelbert Steiner interrogating a teenage Burmecian perched upon the roof of a smithies.

“Steiner!” She smiled. He turned to her.

“Lady Freya.”

She instantly detected all was not well. His usual scowl was not there, he was as white as a sheet and had an expression she had never seen him wear, and his voice in greeting fell flat upon the stones of the street like lead.

Something had outwardly changed in him.

Fratley landed at her side.

“Sir Adelbert Steiner?” He asked

“To whom do I speak?”

“I am Sir Fratley, I bid you fair weather and safe travels, fellow Knight!”

The sound of the rain against Steiner’s helmet seemed to grow in volume at this remark.

“I thank you, my honorable comrade.” Steiner replied. He looked to Freya. “So this is your missing loved one.”

Freya nodded, taking Fratley’s forepaw.

Steiner suddenly looked deeply miserable and seemed to shrink several inches in height.

“I am grateful that you have finally found each other.” He said very quietly. Freya had never heard him say anything quietly before. She was about to ask what troubled him, but Fratley spoke up first.

“I understand you are searching for the surviving son of Dan and Learie?”

“Yes, I am. Do you know where he is?”

“I do not, but we search for him as well!” Fratley replied.

“To repay a debt!” Freya added, tightening her grasp.

“I seek retribution.” Steiner replied flatly, looking directly at Freya.

She stopped instantly. So did Fratley.

“What?” She was eventually able to ask.

“He is but a child!” Fratley’s voice bore indignation.

The two rats looked at each other.

“Jack has destroyed my fair General Beatrix, swordswoman of Alexandria. I witnessed it with my own eyes. I must see that he answer for his crime against my Kingdom.” He said to Fratley, and then turned to Freya. “And against me.”

Fratley’s voice calmed slightly in an attempt at diplomacy. “Sir, are you sure we are in fact searching for the *same* Jack?”

“If the Jack you search for is a child of Burmecia, and bears injuries of a most severe nature...” Steiner responded.

Fratley's eyes widened and his frame was jolted by the sudden arrival in his memory of where Jack had gone, and there was a long period of silence. He and Freya looked at each other in silent horror and he felt her shivering through her forepaw. A million words passed between them silently.

"You must forgive me, captain Steiner!" Fratley began, feigning his original tone. "I am sure by this point my dearest Lady Freya will have informed you of the damage to my memory incurred some time during my travels through the world!"

Steiner nodded. "She has, and you both have my greatest sympathies."

"You must understand sir, understand my mind is still in quite a broken state and I fear would not be of much help to you!"

Freya had never heard him lie before, nor would she have believed he could have done it so adeptly. Before she lost him, he had been absolutely incapable of lying to anybody even when it was needed. Another surprising attribute of this new Fratley.

"You need ask no forgiveness of me, Sir Iron Tail Fratley." Steiner saluted him. "I must continue my

search.” He again turned to Freya.

“My Lady, I bid you farewell, it is agreeable to see you again, I only wish it had been under better circumstances.” He scrutinized her. “There is something different about you.”

He let the rain fill the void of silence as he thought.

“You look happier. For that I am so grateful.”

“I found what was lost to me.”

“And I lost what I had found.”

Steiner sighed, turned away, and walked with metallic footsteps into the gray of the rain, a heavy satchel carried behind him.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Fratley turned to her.

“Fratley, what’s going on?”

“I don’t know and I don’t like it, we *must* find Jack before Steiner does. His claim *cannot* be true. I know exactly where he went.”

“You do?”

“Yes, to Cleyra.”

“But Cleyra is...”

“Destroyed, I know. I don’t understand either.”

“But why didn’t Jack come to see me?”

Fratley shook his head. “I don’t know, but we must hurry.” Fratley did not let go of her hand and quickly began leading her.

“To Cleyra?” She asked, breaking into a run to keep beside him.

“Yes, but first we must go home to prepare for our journey.”

“It would be our pleasure.” Wei smiled.

“...For that we are most grateful.” Fratley shifted his weight from one foot to the other, detesting stillness and fiercely wanting to continue moving.

“I will keep ice stocked in the icebox so your produce will not spoil, and I will keep the dust down. Upon your return it will be as if you never left.”

“Thank you, and please thank your husband for us.” Freya took her forepaw.

“But where are you going in such a hurry?” Wei asked.

“Cleyra.” Freya’s voice was hushed. Fratley shot her a glance.

Wei was visibly shocked, but before she could respond, Fratley added; “And Wei, you must *not tell a living soul*, this is a matter of *grave importance*.”

They hurriedly packed. Supplies, clothes, casks of water, scant nonperishables that they knew neither would enjoy eating. Cleyra was by no means a short distance.

Freya was overwhelmed with the desire to not leave this little nest they had just begun making for themselves and felt the cold chill of her previous travels again blowing through her, but she remained silent.

While mentally tabulating their supplies to make sure nothing was forgotten, Fratley would bring his fist down on the table while staring blankly forwards and let out frustrated exclamation.

“I should have followed him the moment he left!”

“I needed you.” Freya said quietly, putting her forepaw over his.

“Yes — you did... you do.” He softened his voice. “And I need you, and right now Jack needs *us*.”

“Yes, he does. Just please don’t leave me again.”

Fratley stopped completely.

He turned and went to her and cradled her face in his paws.

“You have my word that I will *never again* make that mistake.”

“William, what did I tell you about jumping between rooftops.”

Wei tended to her child’s leg as silent tears rolled down his face. When she shifted it to better apply the wrapping, he winced and bit his lip. At least his cries had subsided, but she could tell he was restraining them.

“It’s alright to cry, dear.”

“Dad would think I’m weak.”

Wei put her face near his.

“Your father loves you very much, no matter what you do.”

She set the bandage.

“But you are not a bird, no matter how much you wish to be one. You are also my oldest by five minutes, so you must set an example for the others or else I will have a whole family without legs.”

The sound of clanging tin became audible over the rain, and drew near.

A knight in moderate armor bearing a large satchel abruptly rounded the corner and stopped at the sight of the mother and her child.

“I am —”

“You’re the knight from Alexandria!”

“Yes, and I must find the war orphan Jack!”

“Freya and Fratley went to search for him in Cleyr...” Her eyes widened, she gasped and her paws flew against her mouth.

“Cleyra!” Steiner stood up straighter. “You have the gratitude of the Kingdom of Alexandria!” He

then tore off down the street at a speed she thought it would be impossible for anyone of his size wearing such armor to reach.

Wei's heart sank into the puddles of water around she and her son. In her absent-mindedness she had broken her promise and somehow knew then she had made a terrible mistake.

Steiner knew not pain or fatigue; he now knew only his direction.

El Adrel towered before him over the rooftops and statues of Burmecia in the rainy haze, and so did the echoes of working men. It appeared less as an airship and more as a spired building that had stood there for centuries.

"Someone here to see you, captain."

"I'm busy, mister Bannister."

"I'm sorry but I couldn't stop him!"

"Oh Frabjous Day..." Bancroft Ellenroad threw his paperwork down onto the chart table as the

sound of loud tin stomping filled the bridge and rattled the windows.

“Captain, I demand to speak with you!” Steiner practically jumped up and down on the spot.

Bancroft scrutinized him. “And who might you be, the bastard who came aboard from Alexandria without paying his fare?”

Steiner’s jaw slammed shut tightly.

“Yes, everything does in fact get back to me eventually. I know what I look like but I run this airship wound tighter than the clocks in the office of the Regency. I don’t care who you are or what flags you wave, this is an airship of the Civil Service and you pay to travel aboard her like everyone else does, this isn’t a State’s cruise where guests are given favor due to stature my good man! Nothing so egregious!” Bancroft mashed his pointer finger into the table with emphasis, ripping the navigational chart. “And Bannister, fetch a new chart!”

“I am Captain Adelbert Steiner, first of the Knights of Pluto of Alexandria Castle, protector of Queen Garnet Raza Alexandros the Seventeenth!”

Bancroft howled with laughter.

“A *captain* with no *ship*? Ahaaahahahaugh!” Spittle rocketed in all directions, as did a shining golden tooth filling.

The first mate who had been setting the new chart quickly dove after it with a thud, Bancroft continued through his raucous expulsions of mirth.

He grabbed Steiner’s hand and shook it violently. “Aha — and I am captain Sprinkleberry Vomit Wagon the Third of Fifth, and I sail upon the clouds on my enchanted market basket! Of w — what service may I be to the castle with an oversized knife through it?” He again roared with laughter.

It was the most unabashed show of disrespect he had been the target of in his life.

Aghast, Steiner could not gather himself quickly enough to respond before Bancroft rammed his gigantic hand into the side of his cheek and bellowed: “BANNISTER — oh you’ve already...”

The first mate held up Bancroft’s gold filling.

Bancroft snatched it away from him.

Turning grim, Bancroft contemplated the filling in his hand and addressed Steiner without looking at him. “What do you want?”

“I demand that you fly this airship directly and immediately to the site of Cleyra. It is a matter of great importance.”

At this, Bancroft lifted his head. He peered at Steiner with a look of disgust, apathy and disbelief. Without reply, he slowly lifted his left hand, and Steiner followed it until it was fully extended toward the large windows at the front of the bridge.

The bridge sat atop the superstructure of the vessel which mostly occupied her rear third, and presided over the immense foredeck sprawling forward. Mostly flat varnished wood decking populated with ventilators, it was crowded with refugees and supplies being offloaded, going down long gangways.

A large rectangular door had opened in the foredeck and from it protruded the long arm of a previously hidden crane from deep within the ship, bringing up immense quantities heavy goods on slings and platforms from her cargo holds.

“Cease these affairs and ready the ship.” Steiner barked.

“I won’t.”

The knight boiled with rage, more from being previously mocked than Bancroft's refusal to cooperate. He instinctively put his hand on the pommel of his sword.

"I'm not going to fight you my good man." Bancroft scoffed.

"Then prepare to have your airship temporarily commandeered by order of a captain of the Alexandrian Kingdom."

Bancroft laughed a bitter, dry laugh.

"Is there really need for such archaic and lengthy statements?"

Steiner found himself nonplussed and was silent. Bancroft continued in a very different tone, much more quietly.

"You are standing on a flying ship, these are *modern times*."

"I still intend to commandeer your ship, by force if necessary. You know as well as I do that knighthood still carries weight in these lands."

"Yes and you do realize that in the Kingdom that this ship currently sits within, you are one of the most hated class of service under the most hated

flag, and doing so as far as I am concerned, and as far as *these people* are concerned, would cause an international incident?” Bancroft again furiously gestured to the scene beyond the windows. “This continent was just covered in war, a war *caused by people like you* who blindly followed orders for that mad idiot Queen of yours, and the supplies and people I bring here are because of what your Kingdom did to this one. Need I remind you sir that your sworn duty is to protect Alexandria and its royal family?”

Steiner sank and felt reduced in height. What he was hearing was sense however much he disliked it.

“And I don’t hold with being ordered about *on my own ship*.” Bancroft drove home the point.

There was a long and heavy silence. The other crewmen nervously fumbled at their tasks, trying to be invisible.

“I relent.” Declared Steiner.

“There’s a good fellow.” Bancroft replied. “Better the war be in words between you and I than down there, in more bloodshed and sorrow for innocents.”

He gestured a final time out the same windows before bringing his gigantic anvil of a hand down on

the table with a slam, ripping the new navigational chart.

He looked at it with disdain.

“In the interest of diplomatic relations...” Bancroft began, sliding open a drawer in the table and fumbling within it. He withdrew a ginbottle of sapphire blue glass, bit its cork and withdrew it with his teeth, and took several long swigs.

“...In the interest of diplomatic relations in these *trying times*, and as a sign of respect for a Captain of Alexandria, I shall grant your request and divert this ship to Cleyra under your direction *after* I have finished offloading on my original schedule.

“How long will that take?” Steiner asked.

“I will assume you are taking an action of your own volition as I know your Queen was safe in the castle when I departed Alexandria yesterday. It will take me a day to finish offloading and tabulate the new weight of the ship.”

Steiner looked dismayed.

“Captain... what was it?”

“Adelbert Steiner.”

“Captain Adelbert Steiner, you evidently do not yet know how steam engines work, which is to be excused as they are relatively new on the stage of this idiotic theatre that is the world. Even *if* I was as eager to leave as you were, if I had the stokers build the largest fires possible at this moment, it would take four hours to build pressure enough in the boilers to turn the engines, and they would crack the Morrison tubes trying to do so. So you see, we are well and truly stuck here even should I decide to strand all these poor people and their goods.”

6. Jack of All Trades

— JACK OF ALL TRADES —

‘I highly doubt I will return to this place’ - Freya

Freya silently marveled at Fratley as he made minute adjustments to the burlap sail.

The sandskid rode over the Vube desert like a freshly loosened arrow.

Each time it juttered over a patch of rough sand, dipped with a ridge or jumped over a furrow, his body moved with the Spartan craft to compensate but his head remained still and level in contrast, as an Owl’s did riding on a branch in the wind.

He continuously searched entirely by feel for the best point of sail to make the best speed as the wind changed, and she watched him intently as she worked the tiller attached to the tail skid, occasionally glancing at the tiny leatherbound compass in her forepaw.

Together driven by nought but wind, the two of them sailed over the flat unpainted canvas of the

desert under the rising sun. The featureless landscape made her feel as if they two were the only inhabitants of the entire world.

She was aware of the smile she wore.

This was all she had ever pined for years ago. She and Fratley, comrades and beloved companions in adventure and hardship, grace and hindrance, always together regardless of the tides of fortune, success or failure. Moving through the world with their combined skills, bravery, ingenuity and selflessness for each other, making love in moments of respite. This had been her foolish youthful ideal of grandeur and a life well spent. For a moment, she was sixteen again and her heart beat strong and forgot its scars.

It was the height of irony, she thought, that she was only granted this after she no longer wished for it.

All she pined now and in a very different way was Fratley, and warm dark solitude with him in her little home. She yearned to turn the skid about and be nowhere but there with he.

“Freya, look there!”

She turned her head to where Fratley gestured with his long nose.

Their skid raced with the Vubara Bird.

The long winged creature was a silhouette against the fire-orange sky and rising sun. It soared level, its long legs and tail trailing behind and riding the same wind that propelled them.

A creature of legend, she never thought she would have the fortune to lay eyes on one.

All thoughts of gilded past and adventure left her head the moment what had once been Cleyra came into view.

Even at some distance, the debris of blackened branches and masonry cast from the explosion had caused Fratley to loosen the sail to slow the skid and Freya to alter their direction several times.

The great trunk was laid low, heat-twisted and black, and by far most distinct in that from its gaping hollowed top and voids that had once been natural cavities poured a now solidified flow of glass. The sand that had once filled and poured through the tree from the sandstorm had been fused

by the intense heat. Although somewhat murky dark instead of perfectly clear, it shimmered like a crystalline waterfall in the rising sun.

After all this time, the husk still visibly smoldered, a discernible trail of gray smoke serving as an indicator of the wind's direction. Embers and fires still burnt deep within it. The nearer they drew, the more the radiant heat of the tree and ground became apparent to them. The explosion had been so intense that it was still hot.

The sand around the base of the tree had been similarly fused into glass. Fratley looked to Freya and Freya understood, and steered away.

The sky had turned from fire orange to gold as the sun rose higher. Circling Cleyra's immense trunk took the better part of half an hour and two upwind tacks on the far side. As they circled their keen ears and eyes searched for Jack. Finding nothing and concluding they had most likely somehow beaten him there, they drew back to the side they had arrived at, the side that faced Burmecia. Here, Fratley let fly the sail and the skid drew to a hissing stop. He brought the sail over them both as a sunshade, and here they waited.

Each took turns scanning the horizon while the other dozed and rested their eyes from the bright desert sand and sky. Freya had always been an excellent timekeeper and noticed Fratley would always try to silently prolong his turn and shorten hers. She let him, without complaint, but kissed him to let him know he could not fool her.

And then she picked out a tiny hooded figure across the featureless sand.

The figure stopped when they ran to him, and said nothing at first. Fratley drew himself down onto a knee and bowed to him, deeper than she had ever seen him bow to anyone. It was less a knightly gesture and more that of worship.

Freya broke the deafening silence.

“Dearest Jack, your father’s treasure, do let me see you...”

She heard and felt Fratley inhale sharply, and knew the words that did not escape his mouth. Still, she lowered herself.

The little figure shuffled, but did not outwardly object as Freya slowly knelt and reached out toward him with both her forepaws. As delicately and

lovingly as if it were her own child, she gently lifted the hood.

Despite all she had weathered, it took all that was within her to resist weeping and recoiling with grief at the familiar, unfamiliar little half face.

“Hello Freya, I remember you. Thank you so *much* for trying to protect my family.”

His voice rung with sincerity.

“Oh Jack...” her voice cracked and betrayed her.

“Don’t worry, of all my wounds, this one hurts the least.” He said with a resolute but empty smile.

He took her forepaw in both of his. One white and slender, the other dark red and burnt and mangled and nearly burnt away.

She felt Fratley’s arm around her shoulder and this helped her continue to resist what was growing inside her.

By her arm, Jack led them both quietly over the sand and onto the field of shining glass, toward the burnt trunk. They three were perfectly reflected upside down on the ethereal flat mirror sheet.

Stopping at where the exposed roots became the base of the tree, equally black and stonehard, he lay down and felt the dead wood.

“After you got us to the cathedral....” He began.

Freya and Fratley both knelt right beside him.

“None of us could find you after a while, but everyone was too afraid to go out and look. And then Odin came...”

Freya was on the Red Rose again, and began to relive what she had seen. She took Fratley’s forepaw and could not stop trembling.

“There was fire everywhere, it really hurt. Mum wrapped us up in her arms and protected Adam and me, but the fire hurt her too much and she screamed and died holding us.

Then the whole place just kind of blew away around us and everything burned. All the things turned into pieces and the pieces went everywhere, Mum and my brother got burned like this...”

Jack spread his arms matter of factly.

“But only half of me did because a big stone tilted over me. Then this half of me got thrown off the tree by the hot wind from the fire, along with I

guess all the pieces the whole town, and I fell and got all broken, but seeing mum and my brother turn into dust broke me inside way worse, so I didn't feel the pain on the outside of me, so I just started looking for Mum and dad and my brother Adam."

Freya's trembling turned to shivers, and she felt the same in Fratley. Her breath refused to come to her.

"So I looked and looked, for a really long time, until I found Mum and my brother. They were all broken and missing pieces and my brother was dead too, so I found as many of their pieces as I could put Mum and him together so they'd be safe.

I never found dad so I reckoned he got buried by all the stuff that went everywhere, so I went back to Mum and Adam and I went to sleep."

Fratley stared blankly through the gaps in his fingers at the glass ground, one forepaw loosely against the side of his face and the other that had fallen limp in Freya's, and had become ice cold in her grasp. She trembled no more, and was simply hollow.

"It's funny because when I went to sleep I didn't hurt, not on the outside anyway, but when I woke up

I did hurt, more than I thought I could ever hurt, and I couldn't stop screaming. I didn't think I'd wake up at all, I really didn't want to because I wanted to follow Mum and Dad and Adam, really bad. We don't just disappear when we die, you know." Jack stated, just as forthrightly, his voice both perfectly and poorly masking pain. "Then one of those beautiful dancing women from the cathedral found me, the one named Shannon. You protected her, too! She was so beautiful that I wanted to stay awake for a little bit longer. She thought I was dead at first but when she found out that I wasn't she cried lots and lots, and took me with her. She was really nice to me. We found a bunch others, lots of them were really hurt too, and then an airship found us."

He abruptly stopped talking. A long silence indicated that Jack had finished.

"No child should be made to go through anything like this." Fratley finally spoke, hoarsely.

"No one no matter how old they are." Jack corrected him, flatly, shaking his head.

Freya could say absolutely nothing.

"Jack, I *must know* how you came to restore my memory to me."

Jack smiled a sad half-smile. It was the saddest smile either of them had ever seen in all their wanderings.

“I hurt so much that decided to go around the world, just like you did.”

Fratley let out a hollow laugh that wasn't a laugh but a cough.

“Shannon and everyone else who stayed with me tried to stop me so I ran away. I had to figure out a way of making things right.”

“How does a child go around the world?” Freya asked, blankly.

“People treat you very differently when you're a child.” Jack responded with a tone of mild indignance. “You get free rides on wagons and chocobos and even airships, people let you through gates without papers, they give you food and water even if you don't have any money!”

The corners of Freya's mouth somehow formed a smile. Despite the terrible emptiness, she was confounded and impressed by Jack's simple but knife-sharp cleverness. Suffering and loss had made her clever, too.

His tone abruptly shifted to sorrow. “Especially if you tell them you are looking for your mother, or that your family is dead, and when I told them that I wasn’t lying.”

Freya sniffed. She knew that to be true.

“Being an orphan is a powerful bargaining tool. I learned lots of things from lots of different people and creatures, I learned how to talk better, I learned how to help people and trick people, I learned how to make things, I learned how to look at things differently. I learned what mist was and where it came from, and I learned lots about you two. I heard much about your travels.”

“It seems I have met my match. Had I achieved all this at your age, I might have made a difference...” His voice trailed into nothingness as he stared at his own reflection in the glass beneath him.

“You don’t go around the world because you want to, you go because you *have* to. That’s why I made it and you didn’t.”

This stung Fratley in his center. It stung even more so because he knew Jack meant him no

effrontery or insult whatsoever. He now felt as if he were a child again, and Jack were some sage.

“And I didn’t just go *around* the world.” Jack continued, looking straight at Fratley with his Hazel halfgaze. The force of his stare made Fratley lift his head and look back. “I went inside it, and I’m sure I went beyond it.”

At this Freya and Fratley’s eyes grew wider.

“I even saw the Blue Stone where we all come from.”

Freya’s eyes grew wider still. Jack now stared at her.

“I met a recordkeeper in the place called Daguerro who kept a book of all that happened everywhere. I spent almost the entire last year of my life there.

He told me there was a horrible Thing that was made like a machine that lived like a monster and looked like a tree, and it was hurting Gaia and everybody on it for a long time, you and your friends made it die and then Gaia began to heal, and people’s inner light could go back to the Blue Stone.

He told me how when the horrible tree Thing died, it left a hole that went all the way down to the Blue Stone, and he told me how to get there. It took me days to get there and get down the hole, but I found the blue sky ocean in the Middle of the World, and I saw how the Blue Stone lit it up like the sun.”

Jack related the story to them as if they had seen none of what he described for themselves, this astounded Freya far more than the story itself.

“Was — was it free?” Freya whispered.

Jack tilted his head.

“The roots, they grasped the Stone no longer?”

“There weren’t roots.” Jack replied. “There wasn’t anything, just the Blue Stone, and its warmth.”

Freya closed her eyes and pictured the strange Terran sky, and in her imagination, dashed the awful un-tree away from the blue orb in its center.

“It asked me to come back to it.” Jack went on. “But I couldn’t. Not until I had found where Mum and Dad and Adam were and not until I had fixed everything else. It told me my family was inside it, their feelings, their memories.”

Jack's voice suddenly broke, and his entire body went limp.

"It told me they could finally come back inside where they belonged after being kept out..."

He began to weep bitter tears, even from the hole where his missing eye should have been.

"I didn't really understand what *all this* was about until it told me that. It told me in feelings, not in words. You can't understand *anything* from words, not really."

Freya began to cry.

"That's why only people who've felt the same thing can truly understand each other." Jack added. "Have you ever felt what it feels like to look at a happy family in a warm house through the window when you are out in the cold and dark?"

Freya had.

"I felt that so many times as I wandered the world, but I felt it more when the Blue Stone told me that than anywhere else. I looked inside of it and I felt my family in there and I was outside and couldn't go in."

Jack steadied himself against his own grief for a time, and then went on through his own tears.

“But they were inside, where it was warm and safe forever! They had been pushed out and couldn’t come inside before until you all killed that horrible Thing around the Blue Stone. And so you see, Lady Freya, you *did* truly save my family, you and your friends, just as you and Sir Iron Tail saved them those other times before. Do not think for one moment that you failed to do so.”

Freya choked on her own gratitude. What he said did not make her feel any better. She remembered what poor miserable Learie had said in the cathedral, with tears in her voice.

“I just want to save the children.”

“I told it that I wasn’t finished and couldn’t come in yet. It told me it could not give me what I needed, so it opened a door to the place beyond it.

It was such a beautiful place, it was all white. There was a beautiful light there, the Blue Stone came from it a long, long time ago, and all the other Stones did too. I bargained with it. I said I needed to fix what was broken, and heal those who helped my family, and make those who did them harm pay for

what they'd done. I just wanted gifts to protect my family and fix everything, the way the Blue Stone makes them to protect itself, and it understood. I told you being an orphan is good for bargaining. So it gave me three gifts, this is the last one I have to give."

Jack withdrew a pearl-white orb from his small satchel. It glowed with iridescent inner warmth, and it reminded Fratley of what he had seen at the end of the tunnel of light that the emerald green sister orb had opened to him.

Freya's entire world stopped.

"Eidolons..."

"I don't know what they're called. The light didn't tell me, and I don't really think it matters. It just said they were gifts and in order for them to work, like any gift, they had to be taken willingly."

"And I took mine as such..." Fratley broke his silence.

Jack beamed at him. "And that's why it worked. Thank you, Sir Iron tail, for accepting the gift I had to give. You gave Freya a gift greater than I could ever have given her by doing so."

Fratley's arms were instantly around Freya, pulling her into his lap and kissing beside her head as he kept his eyes focused on Jack.

"And Beatrix accepted hers as well, because she knew she had to accept the consequences of what she had done to all of us."

Fratley and Freya were overtaken with a sudden chill.

What could he possibly mean by that.

"I don't regret what I've done. But I have one more gift to give before my half-life is over." Jack caressed the pearl white orb. "Then I can go inside, and be with my family."

Freya and Fratley looked at each other with an unease that grew quickly into a silent horror. They both felt the same and both knew it in each other, in that they both suddenly and overwhelmingly sensed an impending and immediate end to Jack.

He continued to speak.

"I meant it when I said I wanted to protect my Family. Because of what you've done, I consider you Family now, too."

He shakily walked to them, and without even realizing it they instinctively opened their arms. He nestled between them and wrapped their limbs and their clothes and their whole selves around him like a blanket, disappearing absolutely between them.

“I love you so much...” He sobbed.

Freya drew Jack’s broken little half body under her chin and sobbed, too. Fratley put her head under his chin and she felt the rain of his silent tears in her moonlight hair and on her ears.

“I want Mama, I want Dad, I want Adam.” Jack shrieked into Freya’s bosom.

She inhaled sharply as she cried.

“Jack the Brave fought beside me.” Fratley began. “His story is one of triumph and of tranquility.”

Jack’s cries lessened.

Fratley continued. “Jack the brave, with his cleverness and pureness of heart, and his understanding of all that is Right and Wrong, turned Odin away from the beautiful green tree of Cleyra. And his beautiful mother Learie, and his brave father Soldier Dan, and his brother Adam did *not*

die. And the beautiful cathedral stood tall and shimmered purple and blue in the sun, and Cleyra's green tree continued to grow and bloom each spring, as did its people."

A new urge sprang forth in Freya's heart among the intense emotions and pain. She suddenly yearned to see Fratley as a father.

Jack's cries subsided almost too quickly as Fratley finished his narrative. Freya felt him tilt his head up. They both turned their heads downward to his. He still streamed tears, but wore a quivering smile as he looked up, and his Hazel eye shimmered for the first time since either of them had seen it. It was the first time his gaze had actually appeared as a child's.

"I can make that story real." He said.

He wriggled from their grasp, tightly clutching the pearly orb.

"Jack, please come back here."

He ignored them and climbed into a notch in the base of the burnt Cleyran tree, sat himself upon a jagged burnt outcropping, and squeezed the orb. It cracked like an egg. Fratley visibly winced as he did so, expecting a powerful reaction.

Jack removed pieces enough to make the cracked orb form a bowl. Now open, exposed within it sloshed an equally pearly liquid that shimmered with the light that they had seen emanating from it. Not one drop did spill.

Gazing at it for a few moments, Jack suddenly shut his eyes and tilted the liquid back into his mouth.

His body tore, and from it burst forth Life.

Roots and Green surged from the notch where Jack had just been.

The burnt trunk heaved and changed, and shook the entire desert. Freya and Fratley were thrown to the ground by the force.

The protruding roots shifted. The field of glass and the solidified flow of it within the tree shattered in an instant with a deafening, ringing crash that filled the sky and echoed to the horizon.

Freya found herself picked off her feet in Fratley's grasp as the glass floor under them cracked, he steadied them both. He had donned boots before they left Burmecia, she had not. Had he not have swept her up, her feet would have been

bloodied by the jagged edges. He moved them both to a protruding root, and they struggled up it.

The flying shards turned the world around them to rainbows, each sliver a tiny flying prism casting its own at random as it fell. Fratley was instantly reminded of his previous experience, the power of the color was so similar.

The shards turned to dust as they fell, sweeping harmlessly over their hair and shoulders. What had once been a mirrorlike glass floor was now a shifting churning mass of hundreds of pieces smashing and grinding against each other, breaking smaller and smaller.

The tree was moving, and changing, and as it did it began to grow.

New living roots of every shade of healthy brown and green continued to pour from the notch Jack had entered, until it drew closed as the trunk made itself Whole. Bark blackened and charred cracked and lurched and fell away to reveal fresh and living tree. The root they now clung to shifted upward, the dead, hot wood was suddenly cool and warping against their hands and feet, changing in color. Moss sprung from folds of bark, wet sap and dew poured and oozed from furrows and spaces.

The air was full of the noise of newness, creaking and expanding and rubbing of fresh and growing wood. The trunk that had been surging higher had now begun to shoot out branches. Starting as tendrils and widening, they extended in all directions, arching across the golden sky. It towered higher and higher into the sky, higher even than they remembered the original tree standing.

As the great rise reached a crescendo, for a moment there was hesitation as if building for a finale, and then came a tremendous explosion of foliage. The sky was suddenly blotted out by billions of crisscrossing branches and an undeniable tide of emerald green leaves. The billowing treetop expanded with such force that it produced a rushing wind that again laid them low. The sky changed from gold to green, the searing sunlight turned to shade.

It did not stop at the boundary set by their memories of the original Cleyra. The tree *hurled* itself at the horizon in all directions seemingly with a great joy, overflowing itself with shimmering wet greens of emerald and chartreuse and every other shade. The sound was now that of gentle creaking and a great ambient hiss of rustling leaves. Even

now the base of the trunk thickened and settled, the roots slowly crept outward and grew larger.

The broken glass amidst the grasping and shifting roots ground churned and stirred in a cacophony of ringing sound and broke smaller into smithereens and began to sink beneath a new layer of fresh sand that burst from underneath it. Soon there was no evidence whatsoever of the otherworldly mirrored ground.

As the lower growth around them tapered off and slowed to a pace visibly indistinguishable, the last extremities and leafy branches only ceased their quick expansion when the canopy of the tree touched the horizon itself.

As the noise stopped, they found themselves crying bitterly.

Cleyra's tree was far larger than it ever had been before, and little Jack was gone.

On the brand new trunk Freya and Fratley grieved, as they had for the loss of each other. They grieved in the soft green light cast by the leaves above, and in the sounds they made as the prevailing desert wind gently caressed them.

Their sadness still burnt them, but the tree made for them a guarded Sanctuary with which to quench it.

As they held each other, a peace so utter and complete overtook them that they nearly fell asleep.

The softness and silence was Whole and Absolute. The concavity of the root they lay in was now full of soft moss and cradled them as they held each other.

Long after their cries had fallen silent, Freya whispered.

“Fratley, your hair...”

“And yours...” he mouthed, even more quietly.

The dust of the glass shards had settled in their hair and made each appear to the other to shimmer with a halo of rainbowed stars, that winked brighter and dimmer and changed color as the light filtering through the tree slowly shifted.

Another noise slowly became apparent to them with accompanied motion in their peripheral vision, a syncopated and tiny orchestra of clacking feet and beating wings, and chirping.

A tiny Wren alighted near them, behind Freya. She felt it, Fratley saw it. It indignantly trilled its displeasure at their presence and then flew to the next root.

Birds were returning to Cleyra.

“It’s red.”

“It’s brown.”

“A thousand times red.”

“Bannister! Webb! Will you two shut up over there!” The navigator shouted at the helmsman and first mate, breaking their argument.

“That’s no way to talk to your first officer!” Bannister stamped his foot.

The navigator’s eyes abruptly widened and he began to pant heavily, trying to form words.

“That’s better, but don’t you think you are pouring it on a bit thick?”

“T — Tu — Col — Tah!” He stammered, pointing past them and slamming the palm of his opposite hand on the chart table.

Bannister and Webb turned to each other, smirking.

“Turn the ship!” The navigator shrieked.

The other two stared at each other briefly with wild-eyed expressions and turned to face forward. Through the windows they saw something that had not been there merely a minute before, when they had started arguing about Lindenwald Syrup.

A great tree filled the windows of the bridge and spanned their vision end to end, as wide as all the world, and the ship was nearly right upon it.

“What’s this!” Gaspd Webb, dropping his tea.

“Where did that come from!” Bellowed Bannister, convulsing so that his tea went sideways across the bridge.

No sooner had the captain stepped through the bridge door than he added his commentary by rapidly expelling the gin behind his lips in a furious jet against the nearest engine telegraph.

“TURN THE SHIP!” The navigator shrieked again, getting up so fast his chair tripped him and he fell to the floor, smashing his face.

Webb threw himself at the engine telegraph and braved Bancroft's suspiciously long-lasting jet of gin, repelling it as best he could with his hand and being thrown against the apparatus by its force. He swept the handles on both sides to Astern Full.

Bannister set upon the steering telemotor and spun it around hard over against the starboard stop. The steering engine behind it readily hissed to life and its crankshaft whirled, the drum under the floor could be felt to tense up and begin to furiously wind, and the immense highly polished emergency manwheel in the slot just behind the windows began to spin.

El Adrel began to turn.

Webb threw telegraph handles this way and that and had just pointlessly thrown the foredeck docking telegraph over. When Bancroft had finished expelling what remained of his gin, the telegraphs were already ringing back in response and raucous shouting issued from the voice tubes. The captain began to shout in rage; "Straighten her out, Straaaaiighnten!"

"Straighten?" Bannister shouted. "We're going to hit!"

Bancroft furiously worked the telemotor back over center to port.

“Give me the forward vertical screws as fast as they will go!” He shouted.

Webb spun the forward lift engine telegraph.

“If we go hard over, running astern will do us no good, she will side-slip right in! How many years have you been on this ship, point her at danger so the screws can come to bear, and tilt her back to stand on her stern! The lift screws will push backward then!”

El Adrel had been going ahead at a mediocre pace and trailed a thick cloud of black smoke from wetted coal from rain getting into her bunkers in Burmecia.

The airship wheeled toward the shimmering tree that towered above her and blocked her path to the sides, and she bore down on the air with her drive screws spinning in reverse as fast as they would go.

The bow dug in, but the captain's orders rang deep inside the ship and the airscrews on the forward mast torqued and began to beat furiously at the air. Up came the bow, higher and higher until she

took a raucous angle like a dancer standing on her heels.

With much undignified whirling and churning air, the airship came to a stop just beyond the branches of Cleyra.

Freya and Fratley were awoken from their slumber by the throaty and uncaring voice of a steam whistle echoing from a distance, and the unwelcome sound of machinery.

The peace was shattered, the spell broken.

After a few moments dazedly staring at each other, without her asking him to he carefully rubbed the remnants of tears from her eyes and helped her to sit upright.

They looked outward, toward the horizon that the tree now kissed. Beyond the sweep and fall of its leaves they could make out the shape of a white airship coming to rest on the sand.

“What is *that* thing doing here.” Freya’s contempt was audible.

She and Fratley looked at each other. His heart sank at her visible weariness, her eyebrows hung and her half closed eyes were dull with fatigue.

“Jack’s gift certainly won’t go unpunished. I should have known that the scavengers and claimstakers would come to lay their flag here, I just didn’t think it would be this soon.”

Fratley did not know what to say.

She turned back to look at the airship.

“Those damned creations have made the world far too small.” She spat.

“We are here, and I shall fight to defend what Jack gave back to the people of Cleyra, if I must.”

She took his forepaw and kissed it. “If only we had brought our weapons.”

“I need no spear to fight.” Fratley smiled at her, raising his fists.

She laughed sadly, but genuinely. “I am so grateful to have you.”

They began to walk away from the little hollow where they had rested, looking on it fondly before they left it.

“I don’t wish to leave this place.” Freya whispered.

“Nor do I.”

For a short time they walked arm and arm under kind emerald tinted sunlight, and the green danced over the sand. As if, they both thought, on the arm of a cherished newlywed on a tree shrouded boulevard of a royal city, or wading in the shallows of a tropical ocean. For this short time the world they tread was aethereal and blurred the line between fictitious and factual.

And then became slowly apparent the sound of clacking tin boots.

Up came Steiner, red in the face and breathing heavily.

Only upon seeing the two of them did he stop, and look up in absolute confusion.

The tree extended above them in all directions, touching the Rim of the Sky.

“Wh — where is...”

Freya and Fratley both raised their hands in gesture to the tree.

“He’s in the tree?”

The three of them were shaken by a familiar voice; it rang not in their ears but in their heads.

“He *became* the Tree, Steiner!”

The two rats looked wide-eyed around them, and then at Steiner, and then at each other. Steiner reacted very differently and became incensed. Even Freya took a step back as in all the time they had spent together; she had never seen his face filled with true rage. At once the naive and somewhat comical knight she was familiar with vanished and became suddenly formidable and intimidating, a figure of true power.

He looked at the ground, his eyes darted left and right. He let out a guttural noise, and drew his sword.

Finding the nearest root, he began to hack at it mercilessly.

Fratley was with him in an instant and exposed a small dagger in his undershirt with his hand at the ready.

“Stop this!”

“This does not concern you, Sir Fratley!”

“It does! You shall not harm Jack.”

In one deft motion, Fratley painlessly disarmed him. The sword landed in the sand, humming like a tuning fork.

Freya was quickly at his side.

“Steiner, my friend, your conduct does not become you, you must explain yourself!”

“Jack destroyed Beatrix!” Steiner howled with fury.

“No!” Shrieked the voice in their heads.

“Stop it for once in your life, actions have consequences!” Steiner beat the air, as if trying to banish a ghost.

“Jack did not do this, Gaia’s crystal did, but truly I did this to myself!” Beatrix wailed into their minds. “It is you who must face that there are consequences for the actions you take, I’ve had to!”

Steiner disagreed fiercely, and protested.

Freya and Fratley looked silently for Beatrix, nonplussed, and not understanding the manner in which they heard her voice.

“I must see him, Steiner.”

“B — but”

“You *must* let me see him.”

Steiner became still and fought back angry tears. He fumbled with the strap of the satchel on his back and drew it around him, undid the drawstring and removed its contents. It came out in a putrid mass of liquid.

Freya stared at the pitiful creature and knew it at once to be Beatrix. She was somehow instantly recognizable to her, perhaps because she had always viewed her as such a monster and now her physical being reflected her appearance through the glass of Freya’s contempt. She stared fixated, and was unable to look away.

Fratley took it differently, he shut his eyes, turned away and emptied the contents of his stomach upon the sand, shivering.

Steiner held the awful form high, as the one trapped within it demanded.

It peered from its familiar, bloodshot, bleeding eye, and with the blood tears rushed anew.

“So he succeeded.” She thought, and the others heard. “This form is perhaps the only way I can express my regret at destroying this place. May it now stand forever, and be repopulated by this who will never know my name. Adelbert, does thou still love me?”

Steiner coughed through his tears.

“It still hurts.”

“How do I help you?” He asked.

“I wish to protect this place forevermore. Adelbert, I hurt as much inside as without, and I can no longer bear it! Please — please let me out of this body, I wish for you to impale it upon this beautiful tree.”

“I refuse!” Steiner yelled. “For I shall not live without you, we must try and find a way to return you to normal because of your duty to Alexandria and to our Queen, and because I need you!”

“Adelbert, it is not possible, it’s not that I have been changed, it’s simply that I had something taken away. I wished to leave Alexandria because this is what I saw in the mirror, as does anyone who does what I have done. This way of being is torment and I

feel as if I burn, I cannot bear even one more second!”

Steiner sat down with her, cradling the writhing, softly screeching form in the stained beddings of the satchel.

“I commend and lament your servitude, and I declare that you shall be a far better general for Alexandria than I, because your heart is true and pure, unlike mine. This is why I selfishly fell in love with you. I have always destroyed, and you have always repaired! There was a reason you beat me in that challenge so long ago. If my heart had been such as yours, the gift Jack gave me would have had no effect, and I would not hurt so! Please *help me make this stop!*”

“I shall not kill my beloved!” He shrieked.

“Then you shall kill your General! As your commander, I order you to end my life against this beautiful tree!”

The wheels of State moved in Adelbert Steiner like freshly oiled clockwork. Without thought or question, he picked up his fallen sword, placed the struggling mass of flesh and pain against the nearest treeroot, and ran it through. Blood and other fowl

liquid sprayed everywhere, and all at once the miserable little creature was at rest, and it began to melt.

Steiner fell to the ground.

Mist began to erupt from the melting body. Freya stepped back as she now knew what it truly was and had never expected to see it again. She pulled Fratley back, protectively.

The mist did not settle as it normally did. It rushed as if drawn by a hurricane wind up and out beyond the tree, and began to whirl. With its wake of wind was drawn the desert sand.

Around the tree the cloud darted and spread, gaining speed, followed by a puff of sand, and then a cloud, and then a mass, and then a storm.

It whirled faster until there was no gap, and the sandstorm slowly rose high and wide and blocked their view of the white airship, the Vube desert, and the sun from their low level.

Cleyra was protected again. Beatrix had kept her promise, and in doing so, Freya knew, would see no rest, and not ever return to Gaia's crystal.

“It's too late to seek forgiveness!”

And now it truly was.

Freya finally felt dissatisfied in her satisfaction, and so empty that for a moment she forgot that Fratley was at her side. Peace for her was only a soft touch or a kiss at this moment just an arms length away.

Not so for their fellow Knight.

Steiner clawed at his own face and tore off his helmet and the chainmail around his head as he let fly his rage and grief lying on the sand. He was suffering a breakdown and it hurt Freya so much to see that she fell to her knees beside him. There was never a clean repayment; there was always collateral damage. An eye for an eye would blind the whole world.

“Why!” He cried out. “Why! How did this come to pass? Why need I lose my beautiful Beatrix!”

Freya extended a forepaw. “Steiner...”

“Don’t touch me!” He repelled her. “Don’t look at me, do not *speak* to me! You are in part responsible! Damn you!”

Freya wrapped her arms around herself.

“Shall there be no rest for me, shall I always be at the mercy of the will of someone else? What has my Kingdom ever done for me save teach me how to follow orders so blindly that I kill the only one who ever loved me when she tells me to!”

“I love you, Steiner. As do many others...”

“If it weren’t for all of you, none of this would have happened!”

He covered his ears. “I should have never sworn myself to service, they have made of me a repugnant clockwork *tin man*, a child’s wind-up toy!

How was it I never saw the key on my back! I would have fared better as a vagrant! Damn this life, Damn Alexandria, Damn my service, Damn this entire world!”

Puck did his best to keep his sniffles silent. He had followed Jack across the desert but instinctively hidden himself when he saw Freya and Fratley. From behind debris, rocks and the roots of the tree he had quietly shadowed them and watched the entire series of events unfold, and he had not been able to hold back tears since Freya had withdrawn Jack’s hood and exposed his injuries.

He was adept at the art of eavesdropping and observing from afar but until now had saved this talent to provide himself only a source of amusement. Bar fights, lover's quarrels about things he found puny and irrelevant, first kisses, shady transactions in darkened corners, the occasional fellow thief or pickpocket. Never anything remotely like this.

And now he ran, he ran away on his bloodied feet and although the party did not observe him, he now cared not if they should.

In this last hour he had been forever changed and felt as if he had been violently shoved through several years of life. These were the things that his father had frustratedly berated him for, and warned him of, and tried to make him aware of and sympathetic to.

His father...

He nearly stumbled.

What could not be true appeared truer now than ever before. The mask of denial had been withdrawn from the laughing, cruel face of the true nature of things.

His father would never return. He had died in and with this place, and would not return to life with it. Just because he hadn't seen it happen did not mean it was not real, as he had tried to tell himself for so many moons.

He'd never be able to say goodbye. A fitting punishment for never having wanted to in the first place.

He was blinded by the sandstorm as he ran through it and emerged on the other side awash in fresh physical pain, veering this way and that from his now profusely bleeding feet and sand gashes and stinging eyes.

He made no effort to nor was he capable of stealth. Using only his upper body strength and forepaws, he climbed up the side of the white airship on the rope ladder Steiner had used to practically fall off it, and entered through the same open porthole in its side that he had exited out of to follow him. Landing on casks of wine destined for Lindblum and splintering one, he ran away from the light of the window and the adjacent lantern and into the dark inner spaces of El Adrel.

Finding an open crate, he overturned and hid underneath it, lying down and folding himself into a

ball.

Here he cried as he had never before.

The world was much larger and deeper and more daunting than he had realized, and all this realization entailed had lain waiting for him like a set trap under a thin veneer. He had finally broken through it by stopping long enough to finally be distracted from his selfish wants and restlessness, and the trap of realization had sprung.

How was he in any way deserving of the throne of Burmecia? In what way did he possess even a speck of the strength of character he had just witnessed in those behind him as they suffered, and wept, and made sacrifice, and loved, and died?

How ever would he become a Kind and Benevolent and Just King?

How had he wasted so much of his life to only now come to ask this question?

7. El Adrel

— EL ADREL —

El Adrel ran in the direction she had come from with Cleyra at her back. It took quite truly hours for the great tree to vanish over the Horizon, and it did not drop below it so much as it did fade into the haze of the sky, such was its height.

With her came all those who had been bound for Lindblum plus four more. Freya, Fratley, Steiner and Puck.

Steiner had glued himself to the very extremity of the foredeck on the prow of the ship, and stood guard there. Guard over what, he himself could not explain. He refused to sleep, or eat, or speak to anyone. When concerned passenger or crewman alike attempted to strike up a conversation or ask him why he was there, he said nothing and remained absolutely still.

The airship rocked gently on the warm winds of the Vube desert, and coasted easily on the updrafts at its border where the mountains began. She vaulted each peak with room to spare. Men bustled about

and in and out of doors on the forward airscrew mast housing, checking the oil-filled gear casing and oil-fed thrust bearings within. Having run the airscrews on that mast as hard as they would go to avoid a crash earlier, nothing was to be left to chance.

The captain observed with his mostly-watchful eye, perched high atop the ship upon his bridge. He was in an especially fowl mood for having to backtrack to Burmecia, as the whole planned voyage had once again unraveled on him. He now found cause to wonder if a planned and simple itinerary were at all possible on this airship.

Retreating into his quarters, he unfolded across the table quite a long letter from his old friend and occasional nemesis Regent Cid the Ninth. It had come by tracking swallow, the birds who always returned to the silvery magnetite stone they were raised near, and this one directly to that specific stone carried in El Adrel's sterncastle.

It was what he was used to from Cid, beginning as a very state-of-affairs sort of document he thought, concerning the types of civic generalities that bored him to tears, and he had to force himself to read it in its entirety. He was surprised at what lay within.

Bancroft my friend,

I hope this letter finds you, your crew and ship well. I expected you in yesterday and I shall be very displeased if you've run into any sort of trouble. Correspond immediately if you require any assistance.

Converting everything that flies in Lindblum to steam power is proving a frustration. Steam engines are heavy and laborious and only lend themselves to large vessels due to economy of scale. It is difficult to fit them to any small heavier than air craft and due to this we have no further prospects on operating the fleet of air taxis that this city has used for the last many years, and a great deal of the working class has been stranded without affordable or fast mobility as a result.

To that end I am already through the contemplation stages of a transit system in the form of an elevated railway network. We and many other engineers and tinkers in and around the city have found that steam engines lend themselves particularly well to railway use.

We've retrofitted several work locomotives used previously only in the railway systems of the

airship dock and have constructed a segment of double-track elevated railway between the Grand Boulevard and Pollander Boulevard running down Market Street to test these and other machines on.

You must come see it for yourself when you return, it has proven a source of excitement for our citizens and a draw for tourists.

I was forced to retire the Hilda Garde 3. Three days prior while out on a quick tour of the outer Kingdom she snapped her starboard outrigger and we nearly lost the entire ship a crash, it was a miracle we made it back to Lindblum in one piece and without injuries. She is now undergoing a dismantle to free space in the dock. I do not regret this end as she is a well-travelled ship and served the world well in those travels.

Due to the perfection of hindsight, it was to be expected as this she consisted almost entirely of her own engines, and spared on structure for the savings of weight and aerodynamic drag. I built and flew her right to the design limits, which was at the time of no concern. I have far too much on my plate now within the Kingdom to continue the experimental line of airships and we found a

good recipe with vessels such as Prima Vista and El Adrel.

On matters of far greater importance: After much deliberation with certain groups of people and a great deal of contemplation and soul-searching on my part, I have put an end to the Festival of the Hunt. I don't know how much you know of what has transpired over the last year, but a great deal of serious ethical concerns have landed on my plate.

By rights, my Kingdom has decades of crimes to answer for due to the development and use of mist engines.

It has been explained now to me in great detail what Mist actually *is*, or *was* for that matter, and I am appalled at what has been going on regarding its use with this knowledge.

We were unknowingly using the pain and suffering of living beings as a source of power and this is unforgiveable. To that end comes with it a great deal of pondering the nature of sentience itself, and of course cruelty and pain inflicted upon other living creatures. None whatsoever is acceptable, we are a developed

nation and as such it is our responsibility to act in an enlightened manner and lead by example.

I have a sour taste in my mouth over this Festival that is twofold. I detest my own lack of ability to recognize it as barbaric before this time, and I detest the event for being the reason I could not quickly mobilize an armed airship fleet to aid Burmecia and Cleyra.

If I had stationed my father's battlecruisers there in due time, Queen Brahne on the Red Rose would have been no match for them and so many thousands of needless deaths, and the obliteration of an entire Kingdom and its people, would most assuredly have been avoided. Now that things have calmed in the world and I have had a chance to look inward, I will never be able to forgive myself for this.

My Fleet Admiral, Kurn, has a new Wife who is a woman of profound conscience and who believes all life is sacred. She has petitioned myself and the entire regency to stop the festival and has obtained an unthinkable amount of signatures from concerned citizenry. I cannot deny the request on these grounds alone.

The King of Burmecia was a dear friend of mine and I had held out so much hope he had survived the destruction of Cleyra. For a time I had searched the Vube desert and surrounding lands for him with any airship I could spare. It is clear now to most others and myself that he is dead. He was a dear friend, I lament his loss intensely, and feel personally responsible. In truth, everything has turned out very badly and not much sits right with me anymore.

Regrettably,

Cid Fabool IX

REGENCY LINDBLUM

SEAL OF THE CENTRAL OFFICE

“Not to worry, I’ll have this room ready in half an hour. My apologies but this whole trip has been a bit upside down.” The cabin boy quickly shoved boxes of soap and herbs out the door.

Freya and Fratley looked at each other. He meant well, but didn’t know the half of it.

Commerce for Lindblum had occupied many lower and smaller passenger cabins while the Burmecian relief supplies had taken up the holds, and some of this hadn't been moved after that had been offloaded.

Neither voiced their frustration but both detected it in each other. After all that had happened, all they yearned for was each other, rest and privacy. Perhaps another thirty minutes, give or take, would make it all the sweeter once a place to rest was open to them. They locked arms, slowly made their way upstairs and tiredly began to stroll the long, mirror-varnished deck.

"This is my first time on an airship." Fratley said, looking all around them at the towering superstructure, the spinning masts and airscrews, the throngs of other passengers crowded around the ventilators and groups of chairs, the windlasses and capstan engines and other objects of curiosity he had never properly looked at before.

Freya shrugged.

"I know." He spoke libraries of understanding in just two words.

She looked at him. “Can you imagine if Burmecia had these? All the death and loss and destruction...”

“Freya...”

“Look what Alexandria did with *just one*.”

He was silent. His idealism fell flat on the varnished autumn-colored planking.

“You’re right.” He said. “You’ve always been right.”

He then drew her into his arms again, off of her feet. She did not protest, it felt wonderful to be borne off the ground and off her aching feet. It felt far moreso to be cradled by him.

The idealism inexplicably sprang back into him from the deck.

“But all those who live and do not possess the gift of flight from birth dream of it, asleep and when awake.” He continued.

“Why not pluck the fruit of our current good fortune, and enjoy what so many others cannot and have not ever been able to enjoy for countless generations? We are standing on a ship that sails the sky instead of the sea, it is the dream of so many of

the world's children and dreamers made real. The dream of flight is universal, my dearest treasure. I wished to fly like a bird since I was a child, and I know you daydreamt the same thing, as we all do when young. To me it is magic and it has set my heart beating almost as lightly as when I first met you. I wish for you to feel the same, and to enjoy this with me."

She clutched his vest and gazed transfixed at him. Each moment together had been a small reminder of why she had fallen in love with him, this one was not in any way small. He had always gazed with wonder at the world around him, something she had always tried to do since meeting him and now had forgotten how to.

He lifted her and placed her on his shoulders, and moved toward the edge of the deck.

Here the slipstream of air moved by the ship met the air it cut through. The wind sent Freya's hair and ears softly whipping all about her head. It made her feel as if she could take flight as well at any moment, her feet being off the ground only heightened the sensation and she tightened her legs around Fratley's head, and he tightened his grip around her ankles.

The cloudbanks towered and glowed orange-gold in the afternoon sun. Immense cumulus formations towered over the airship like mountains and overhanging outcrops. When the hull pushed against or through one, it softly yielded and sometimes poured over the deck. Young ones would play in the white aethereal fluff as it rolled over the planking and others near the railing would trail their hands out and try to grab and hold handfuls of it.

The breeze was strong yet inoffensive, it was warm and gave her no discomfort. The moisture of the clouds lovingly deposited dew on her nose.

Through her feet she had felt the vague but ever-present thrumb of the steam engines and through even his she felt it still. It combined with the more noticeable regular sweep of the rotating airscrew propeller blades. It was deep, consistent, rythmatic. It seemed to keep time over all she saw as a great metronome. The ship gently rocked as soft wind currents met her hull from this way and that.

She craned her neck and looked down on a floor of only clouds. It was as if one could leap from the ship and fall into a bed of them and enwrap themselves in impossibly soft warmth. The sun

glinted off the crests of the floating wetness and cast rainbow here and there.

El Adrel crested the wave of a high cloudbank beside the voluminous form of a thunderhead, gold on one side and dark violet on the other. The cloud split under her bow and pushed to both sides like wake in the water, great and sublime puffs of softness floating away.

A sunbeam struck one at an angle and it showered part of the ship, and Freya, in sudden vibrant color. She saw as her lunar white hair turned every color in the world in its highest saturation as it billowed around her. Extending her fingers to try and halt its wild flight, she found them glowing similarly. The reflection off her diminutive shiny claws flooded her vision with sparkling stars.

She became aware of the presence of following birds. In her reverie on the ship she had absolutely failed to notice them. Doves and Gulls, Trick Sparrows, HedgeWards and even a large gray Puk Puk soared and wheeled about and rode the currents surrounding the airship. One or two would periodically sweep down and snatch a morsel thrown by a passenger, or alight on the deck or railing to rest its wings. The time they spent

laughing at the gigantic mechanical contrivance that had the audacity to fly through their sky was equaled by the time spent enjoying the respite it provided.

She found herself smiling softly but uncontrollably. An undercurrent of laughter was present but could not escape, held back by sublime tranquility.

Anything she had dreamt of flight was overshadowed by the actuality. Now that she could enjoy the sensation without misery and loneliness blocking her view and feeling of all that was around her, she found it better than she had ever imagined.

Below, Fratley felt her body relax and grow warmer. He had achieved at least some of his goal and at this was filled with quiet joy. He kissed her inner thigh. She responded by again tightening her legs around him. She wished for nothing more than for him to turn his head around.

Again understanding her thoughts, Fratley shut his eyes and bent his knees with silent, breathy, unrestrainable laughter and nearly fell to the deck, and she followed suit. She gently put her hands in his hair and stroked his ears in an unspoken I love you.

He moved them to the bow, he wanted to perch his beloved on the very apex of the airship and let her experience being immersed in forward flight with the entire world before her. She knew what he intended and was suddenly filled with a deep excitement.

It was better than she imagined it and the constant gentle wind before her forced her to inhale involuntarily and draw a deep breath of the freshest air she had ever taken into herself. The clouds rolled under the bow as if the airship quietly and smoothly walked across and above the world on a gigantic invisible set of long legs, as the ground disappeared underneath one as they walked. The bowsprit assuredly pointed their way home, although they could not see it. She felt his body under her subtly keeping time with the engine's steady beat, as one does when lost in music. She loved how much he loved this.

Gaia was not visible, so complete was the cloud cover beneath them. The sky seemed endless, and without an earth or a horizon.

Something else caught their eye. Further forward and under the edge of the foredeck directly at the

base of the upturned bowsprit they made out a familiar tin helmet.

Freya shifted on his shoulders to look forward and Fratley followed with his step as if he was an extension of herself.

Steiner stood, peering forward from the small hawspipe cavity around the bowsprit, his sword drawn but laid at his side. Fratley saw him, too.

Freya could only imagine what he felt but knew she imagined it accurately, she wished to help this man she had shared adventure and hardship and good guidance with. She opened her mouth to speak, then shut it. She thought better of it.

At this moment, anything she said would most assuredly make things worse.

She made to dismount and Fratley helped her, but not the way she anticipated. She had meant to slide down his back but he turned her around and lifted her down in front of him, kissing her crotch and lower belly and breasts as he did so. By the time their faces met she was flaming in blush.

She wanted nothing more than to be safely inside with him. The sky was far too large.

“Has it been half an hour?” She panted.

“Surely.” He kissed her. “If not, we force our way in.”

**“Engine fire look like kitchen stove, no?” -
Quina Quen**

Puck found himself on a gallery deck along a wall, looking over a scene unlike any he had seen before.

Gigantic and ponderous machinery whirled and pulsed and pushed back and forth. Brass-capped blocks of iron on trusses straddled immense cranks and shafts and levers barely discernible in a dance of furious and complex motion. Plates and plaques mounted on everything told of the locations of builders, and various facts and figures unfathomable to him about what machine they were affixed to. The room was hot and close with humidity and continued onward it seemed forever into the dark.

The entire place smelled fragrantly but intensely of lubricating oil, something almost entirely new to Puck. The smell carried with it only memories of very specific places in the industrial district of

Lindblum when he had spent time there as a pickpocket.

Men worked tirelessly here and there performing every imaginable task, none of which he understood.

He found himself taken aback that, despite the dim and toilsome environment, everything he looked at was in some way beautiful. The machinery bore striking symmetry and architectural features that he found pleasing, metals of different colors were artfully arranged and contrasted with each other and the despite its size and imposing nature, the sound it produced was musical and percussive, and somehow very quiet. There was something very satisfying to him about listening to it, as he had always loved music and felt similarly when listening to a favorite piece. The sound occurred in time with the complex visual symphony.

He found his foot tapping with the beat in the floor. Almost entirely forgetting his emotional turmoil and somewhat rested from a nap underneath the crate but aching from its discomfort, he descended with inquisitive curiosity into the great confined display of wonders.

“Who’s this?” Asked a gruff voice.

Puck turned to find a tall, brawny man towering over him in loose oil-stained slacks.

“I’m Puck.” He expected the usual response and was both surprised and grateful when he did not get it.

“Hello Puck, you aren’t really supposed to be down here you know.”

“Sorry about that. It’s just really interesting in here.”

“You’re right about that.” The man smiled, and extended a gigantic calloused hand. “My name is Giffard, I’m the watch engineer for the next four hours, and will be again eight hours after that.”

“Pleased to meet you. I’m....” Puck stopped himself. “I’m from Burmecia.”

“Is this your first time on an airship?”

“No, but it’s my first time being in.....”

“An engine room?”

“Is that what it’s called?”

Giffard laughed. “What else would you call a room where all the engines are.”

Puck continued to gaze this way and that.

“How does this all work?” He finally asked. “I’ve always wanted to know, and I’ve never understood how something as heavy as a ship can fly in the air.”

Giffard grinned. “Come with me.”

The fire doors of the boilers were as great hungry mouths, wide and low and pouring forth orange light and intense heat whenever they were opened. At the gesture of Giffard’s hand, a stoker brought one of the iron doors open. The light blinded Puck and the heat made him shield his face.

“You’ve seen a kettle on a stove before.”

“Y — yes.” Puck replied.

“This is the same, but bigger. Think of the boiler as a big kettle with tubes running through it. These fires are inside of tubes that are surrounded on all sides by water, they’re called Morrison tubes. You’ll also hear them called fireboxes.” Giffard went closer to the hulking iron creation and gestured with his entire body. “The fire’s hot gasses and smoke go back down the tube, and then through a big space where it turns around, and then through rows of

much smaller tubes back through the water. From here they go into the smokeboxes.’ He pounded his hand on an overhang over the fire doors with more gigantic doors on it. “From here it goes right up the chimneys and out.”

“What happens if you open those doors?” Puck asked.

“We’d both turn black.” Giffard smiled. “That’s where the soot from the fire collects and we only open those when we are cleaning out in dock.”

Puck nodded.

“You need air to draw the fire, the height of the chimney helps but it isn’t enough especially with a bad wind.” Giffard let Puck to a howling round-sided box with a wheel spinning in it visible through a hole in the side. A machine with a brass cylinder and another large wheel drove it with a shaft. “This is a steam engine driving a fan, just like the big ones drive the ship’s airscrew propellers to move it through the air. The fan drives air through the fires in the boiler and up the chimney.”

Puck understood.

“You’re a good teacher.”

“Only because I had good teachers!” Giffard beat his chest over his heart with a fist. He pointed over the row of boilers, four on either side of the narrow aisle where the stokers worked, eight in total. In the dark Puck made out large pipes connecting them.

“The water in the boilers turns into steam from the heat, but unlike a kettle we don’t let it escape, it stays trapped inside and attains a great pressure. Come.”

They went back through a door to the room of whirling music where they had met.

“Put out your arm.”

Puck did so.

Giffard extended his hand and placed his on Pucks. He gently began to push toward him. “This is pressure. With enough pressure I will move your arm. With enough steam pressure, we can move the piston in an engine cylinder. The faster I move your arm, or the steam moves a piston, the more work we’ve done in a given amount of time. That’s called power. With enough power developed, we can lift and move a heavy object using a propeller.”

He pointed to one of the great iron boxes supported on columns above the whirling

machinery.

“Those are cylinders. Think of it like a room with a moving wall.” He spread his arms wide. ‘Steam under pressure wants to get bigger. Much, much bigger. If you put it in a room, it tries to make the room bigger. If you give the room a moving wall, it can.’ He cupped his hands to form an approximation of a cylindrical shape. “This is the cylinder and the piston is a flat disc that can move back and forth in it.”

He gestured to the machinery in motion underneath the box.

“Going back and forth is all well and good but it won’t do to drive a propeller. You know how a propeller works?”

“No.”

“You’ve played with a Galilean before?”

Puck was impressed. He had many memories of twisting the stem of the small feathered toy between his forepaws to spin and then letting it take off into the air, he was surprised someone who wasn’t from Burmecia knew what it was.

“Yes, I have.”

“Then you understand how an airscrew propeller works!”

“When the piston gets pushed, there is a rod that connects to it and that comes outside the cylinder through something called a packing gland, this is just something to stop the steam from escaping out around the rod. The rod is attached to linkages that spin the crankshaft. There are valves driven by the crankshaft that allow the steam in and out of the cylinder at the right time.”

He lead puck to the far side of the engine he had pointed to, above a shimmering silvery shaft spinning in the dim light. “These shafts drive the airscrews on those long masts that lift the ship. They push air downward, to pull the airship upward. Do you see?”

Puck nodded.

“Most of our engines drive these because it takes a lot of power to keep it in the air. Lifting is the hardest work. The engines further back are what can drive us forward and backward with the airscrews underneath us.”

“Are there different kinds of steam engines?”

“Yes, thousands now. These are called non-dead-centering engines!”

Giffard pointed to something under the engine that looked like a great bronze cask with a rod furiously pumping in and out of it. “That’s the wet-air pump. After the steam has been used in the engine to the point where it doesn’t have enough energy to do anything else, it goes into rows of pipes in a tunnel through the ship’s hull. There’s a fan that blows cold air from the outside through this tunnel, it cools the steam in the pipes so much that it collapses back into water.”

Giffard drew his hands together rapidly.

“Just the opposite of what’s going on in the boiler, it collapses so small that it makes a vacuum and this helps pull the steam through the engines and gets them to make more power due to an increase in difference in pressure. The tubes in the tunnel are called a condenser, this pump is driven by the engine and pulls the water and any air in it out of the condenser and puts it in a tank, and then we use this pump next to it...”

He banged his fist on a much narrower and less visible cylinder next to the bronze cask shaped one, with a similar rod going in and out of it driven off of

the same arm above. “We use this one to return that water to the boilers. It’s a big circle, and the fire provides the energy to make it all happen.”

Puck found he was able to mostly understand everything Giffard had told him.

“This is amazing.”

“Yes, it is, steam engines *are* amazing. They made me who I am today, they use the properties of heat and water only to do whatever we can imagine.”

Freya and Fratley did not unlock from each other after gently coming awake. Their weariness and the gentle rocking of the airship had put them right to sleep after they made love. They were not aware of the time, nor did they wish to be, but he was troubled.

“What are you thinking about?” She whispered.

“Everything at the tree, it’s my fault.”

“And how is that, my love?”

“You can’t see how?”

“All I know is that Beatrix was finally given what she deserved.” She hissed and he felt her breath grow hotter.

“It was my fear of Beatrix that caused me to leave you.”

“Yes, and fear is powerful. My fear for you drove me to chase you. You left because of Beatrix, and those like her. She was responsible for not only the destruction of our two kingdoms, but for filling your heart with doubt and worry and for you becoming lost to me.

Nobody spoke the name of Sir Fratley with fear in other lands, because regardless of your prowess, you conducted yourself differently. It was she who set all of the events of our own misery and the misery of our people in motion. This was all *her fault*, not yours.”

Fratley did not respond in words, he only held her tighter.

“I wish I could return to a time long passed and stop Jack, Adam, Dan and Learie from being harmed, so they could live full lives together as a family.”

Freya felt a lump in her throat.

“They are together now.”

“What does that even mean?” Fratley asked, looking at her.

She could not find words.

“My Freya, they tell me, and you tell me, that our souls come from the center of the world, and return there? And all those that were barred from returning became as wandering mist? What horrors are these... and how do we know that? How can you be sure? What became of all of them? What happens to us after we die? What will become of me, and you? I can’t lose you again!”

Freya clung to him so hard he could feel her heartbeat through her entire grasp.

“I never used to think about things such as this, and now I can’t stop, it hurts more than I could ever imagine.”

“I feel it too, I hate it. Pain can make you run faster, and run longer, it can drive a person across the world. This is the same pain and fear that drove you from Burmecia and from me.”

“Pain and fear are great drivers of all things. I did not know it so tangible. I did not dare think it the

power to drive machinery. I can't believe humans were running engines on the pain and suffering of the dead."

He stopped again, lost in thought. "Perhaps pain and suffering and misery are the true driving forces of this world. It's not fair that living things have the capacity to feel such joy, and yet exist in such a world."

She did not feel that idealism in him anymore, and it scared her.

"Fratley, that story you told to Jack..."

She felt hot tears begin to fall on her forehead.

"I — I know it was stupid and foolhardy, my heart got the better of me..." He began.

"Do you know you would make such a good father..." She interrupted him.

He froze and she could feel his hair stand on end. She was suddenly as nervous and insecure as she was in the beginnings of her novitiate.

"Fratley — I'm sorr..."

He cut her off with a powerful kiss and he felt his tail worm its way around her legs.

The room was tiny and close. It had barely enough room for the bed, and only one small round window, and they both loved it.

“It’s so cozy in here. I never needed or gave great care to lodgings so I was used to sleeping in places like this, but whenever I was in rooms like these I wanted nothing more than for you to be there with me. The smaller they were, the more I wished for you.”

He rolled her over so she was on top of him and he kissed up into her and made her feel as if she would fly away, and then rolled her back securely underneath before the feeling became too intense. As he made her feel safe and warm, her gaze wandered from the tips of his ears to the amber and violet clouds against the pink sky outside the window.

Giffard’s watch had ended. He and Puck sat perched high on the flying bridge in front of the imposing brass searchlight.

He handed the young rat a sandwich. Puck took it in grateful silence and let his gaze, too, wander to the sky. The red moon made itself visible in the haze

of the late afternoon, and the clouds framed it in a way that could not be compared with anything else he had ever seen.

He had told the engineer only some of what has transpired that day.

“Cheer up lad.” Giffard gave him a soft pat on the back. “It’s not as bad as it seems.”

Puck’s gaze did not shift.

Empty ginbottles lay all over the floor.

The captain had long since become glued into an incensed trance on his dividers and had begun swinging them repeatedly between Burmecia and Cleyra, an imagined never-ending dance, and was now walking them across the chart in ever more complex imagined patterns. A knife stood on its handle atop the point marking Alexandria. Lindblum had been entirely barricaded by and covered in pencils.

It was evidently time for one those delightful little breakdowns again.

He was about to attempt to see how far he could wind out the pair of dividers until its spring snapped, when he was brought from his trance by a loud knocking at the door.

“It’s not like you won’t come in anyway!” He roared.

Bannister stuck his head in, his face white as a sheet.

“Captain, I’m not sure how, but we’ve run out of coal!”

Bancroft stared at him, and then grinned.

“Oh, good.”

“...*What?*”

“*Good!*” The captain repeated loudly, grinning wider. “Now go away!”

Bannister recoiled in shock, remained for a moment and shut the door.

As soon as the door latched, Bancroft slammed his gigantic head into the table. The knife and pencils and dividers went everywhere, the ginbottles on the floor jumped into different positions.

Withdrawing slowly and taking almost no notice of the dull pain, he blankly surveyed the dull red stain and dent left behind with disdain. Wide eyed and slack-jawed, he lingered for a moment.

Then, for good measure, he abruptly repeated the motion with greater virulence. He took great catharsis and a freeing sort of joy in feeling his face crumple under the tremendous impact and feeling the wood under the chair give way. The table buckled, and his chair jumped and settled with the reactive force of driving himself down into the former.

Re-entering the sphere of cognizant thought, he began to furiously turn over the problem he had just been rudely presented with in his mind.

“Oh Frabjous Day... What ever could be next.”

Mistakes had been made before in the transition away from mist engines to steam engines. Before, had there been mist to intake, the ship would fly. One simply did not stray far from where the mist lay and the engines would keep running.

These steam engines were far more demanding and required vast stores of fuel and tanks of makeup water and many other things, and quantities against

the weight of the ship's load suddenly mattered. Weights and measures was the new order of the day.

He had been in too much of a gin-induced fog during his last tabulation and, as he remembered it in fact every tabulation since leaving Alexandria.

“Cooler heads do always prevail, be clevveerrr Bancroft....”

The bridge was fully staffed; Giffard had just finished describing the various telegraphs and steering engine to Puck, but none of the crew present had been informed as to the error made or the lack of fuel.

The sight of Bannister sprinting to the captain's door, hurriedly discussing something with him, turning away with a look of horror, running to the helmsman to say something and then not doing so, and then running even faster back from whence he had come, justifiably caused concern in all those present.

This concern was magnified when the captain's door smashed open so violently it nearly broke from its hinges, a familiar boot quickly retracted and

Bancroft thrust himself through and cried; “Burn the furniture!”

Those present collectively stared at him.

“Don’t just stand idly by damn you, I said *burn the furniture!*”

Freya and Fratley were awoken from their deep slumber by a loud knocking at their door. They both startled.

Slowly looking toward the door, the knocking repeated.

“Just a moment!” Fratley spoke up frustratedly, and then muttered, “Rest is all we ask for...”

He found his tail again involuntarily locked with hers. The rest of her was reluctant to let go as well. He kissed her.

It was an impossible task to unlock their tails. Their bodies again showed their true colors. Still connected together, with Freya silently laughing, he partially robed, and hid her behind the door as he cracked it open.

An airman stood before the door.

“I’m terribly sorry but the chief engineer requires all of the furnishings in your room.”

“What?” Fratley asked, after a long pause.

“It is a matter of some urgency.” The crewman replied.

“What sort of urgency?” Fratley rarely ever showed frustration or exasperation but now they freely showed themselves.

“Engine crew’s orders.” The crewman evaded.

Fratley expression and stature changed and he instantly yielded.

“Listen, it really is an emergency and they told me if I said a word about it to anyone I’d be stapled to a bulkhead and they’d use me as a dartboard. You don’t know what kind of man our captain is, he isn’t making a joke.”

A sudden warmth and gyrating tightness around Fratley’s tail and badly masked snorts and squeaks indicated Freya’s mirth. He found it impossible to maintain his intimidating presentation and his mouth quivered.

The crewman tried to look into the room
“Who’s...”

“You shall have our furnishings, give me a moment.”

He pulled himself in and looked at Freya. Her face was red and she was streaming tears of laughter, and softly banged her fist against her own chest in an attempt to keep quiet. He shot her a perplexed look and spread his forepaws, asking her what to do. She hadn’t dressed. She drew against him and indicated for him to pull the door open. He did so and drew it completely around on its hinges so that it concealed her between itself and the wall. Her cleverness never creased to amaze him.

Fratley drew his arm out, allowing the crewman in. Not one, but three entered the room much to his chagrin, and began dismantling and sliding everything made of wood out the door, including their bed.

“Hey!” Freya complained from behind the door as two of the boys began to slide the dresser out, causing Fratley to blush. The three of them instantly stopped.

“Our clothes are in there, I’ll thank you to leave that be until we get them out! And if you mean to take our bed, at least leave the blankets and pillows behind!”

The three of them sheepishly left the room, and were made to wait outside as she dressed and carefully arranged her and his meager garments and items they had brought with them on the floor. Their tails finally untwisted from each other as she busied herself.

Once this had been done, out went the heavy wooden dresser and behind it the reading desk chair and tiny nightstand, even the small wood-framed mirror affixed to the wall. When they tried to take the window curtains, Fratley stopped them.

“You can’t have those either.”

When they had finished, the first crewman stood before the door, saluted them and remarked; “The Regency airship program of Lindblum thanks you!” and drew the door shut before Fratley could have the satisfaction of doing so.

“What in all the world was that about?” he asked her as she stacked the last of the few articles they had brought with them.

“I don’t know, but I’d really like to find out.” She smiled. Something about all this would not cease being hilarious to her, and it was contagious to him.

“So would I.”

Fully dressed, the two rats strode arm in arm down the walkways and stairs of the superstructure. Men moved furniture in a flow of brigades through groups of outraged and mumbling passengers, and it did not take them long to find out where the flow converged. Coming under the spacious arches of the promenade deck with others who had come to watch, they found that a stout metal door stood open and strong arms shoved through it every conceivable object made of wood that had not been bolted down.

Freya looked up at him and pulled him gently to the side to an adjacent door. They went through it and into a corridor, and she deftly navigated them a very short distance to another door and unbolted it.

In front of them lay a stairway down which all the furniture and crew bearing it were travelling down, and it proceeded into a great dark space presided over on either side by what they recognized as the immense boilers of the ship. The room was

hot and smelled of fire and the fire doors opened and shut with the hands of the stokers, pouring forth rays of orange light and heat.

As their eyes adjusted to the flashing reds and darkness, they saw that all the ships furniture was being piled against the back of the room, and thrown into the fire doors whenever they opened.

Chairs and end tables and small shelves went in in one piece. Larger tables, dressers, bed frames and cupboards were smashed into smaller pieces with fire-axes before being fed in. Linens and tablecloths, pillows, blankets, silk drapes, curtains, napkins, flags, sashes and bunting went in in great balled masses. A chessboard and all its pieces went in, as did a grotesque carving of a gnome, as did a tacky and un-picturesque lignum hat stand. The wooden sticks and balls from the ninepins row up on deck weren't spared, either.

A grandfather clock had its works quickly pulled out of it by a stoker and in went its wooden casing, glass and all, followed by its long pendulum.

One tall and well dressed ship's attendant with a gruff voice and almost unintelligible accent proudly declared how he had pulled apart most of the grand staircase over the din of the boiler room, and he and

several others began throwing in the bannisters and balusters and beautiful finely made varnished smooth railings and finials. Another group of airmen slid in a grand piano and a harpsichord from the ballroom which that staircase lead to, and began smashing them to pieces.

It was when the particularly short and angry man who could have only been the ship's cook began throwing several fine paintings into the fires with such a glee and passionate dedication it seemed like he had been wanting to do so all his life, that their mirth began to get the better of them.

Freya detected Fratley rising on his toes.

“I predict that most of those dressers haven't had the clothing retrieved from them.” She speculated flatly.

He could not keep back the laughter he felt and buried his face in his forepaws. She felt it with him and she nearly fell.

They chased each other back to their room.

On the newfound source of fuel for her fires, El Adrel descended through the clouds, and did not

find a path out of them. The warm hues and towering banks of early evening sky turned to the familiar rainy gray-blue of the Burmecian fog of rain as she plowed lower and lower. They were near, but no one knew exactly how near.

Flying without a visible horizon or sight of the ground was dangerous at the best of times with all the crew at the ready, but the situation with the emergency fuel source had thrown ship's business end over end and navigation was compromised as a result.

Bancroft, terrified of running El Adrel aground or wrecking her upon a mountainside, had ordered the airship slowed to very nearly a walking pace, and when no ground had made itself apparent, had slowed the descent as well using his silvered stopwatch against the mercury filled atmospheric manometers used to measure altitude. She hung in the air and although her progress forward was minute, she burnt fuel at an alarming rate to stay airborne.

They were losing daylight and the situation could not have been worse. The foggy blue began to darken all about the airship. Up shouted orders above the bridge. "Lumen!" The word echoed many

times, and the immense searchlight perched right atop the flying bridge sprang to life.

Through a door in its side, one of the crew opened the lamp gas valve and sparked the striker. The blue, dim, hot flame of gas shot forward and as the valve was opened, it impinged upon a sphere of Sunstone suspended in two forked brackets. Upon being heated, the stone, as per its name, began to glow with a fierce white-gold intensity, and its light was cast by the sprawling glass parabolic reflector at the back of the lamp. He adjusted the brackets forward and backward within the lamp on a screw until the reflector focused the lightsource into a solid beam.

Two men worked the gigantic lantern left and right, up and down on its bronze gimbal with sets of handwheels on either side. The sweep of the beam cut the fog like a sword brandished by a silver star.

At last through the fog, the dark rocky ground became visible, first as a disc at the end of the lamp's beam and then as a visible floor. At last a bearing as to their height and speed could be made. Bancroft ordered level flight and slower still. He had the horizontal screw engines completely stopped and the airship coasted forward.

The sense of urgency was tenfold when he was told the furniture was almost gone and the crew had begun to burn their shoes. The ship had to be landed, but the ground was craggy and anything but level.

The great peering eye of the searchlight moved this way and that, searching the ground for anywhere even remotely flat and free of boulders. To save on steam and thusly fuel burnt, any and all machinery deemed non-essential had been shut down and this included the steering engine, and four men laboriously worked the gigantic manwheel at the front of the bridge, moving the rudder by muscle alone and un-assisted.

“Burmecia!” cried the man on watch, turning from his telescope.

Specks of warm light became apparent through the rain off the portside, still very far away.

A voice tube whistled, and a crewman pulled the whistle plug from its end.

“We’re losing the fires, captain!”

He could not chance it.

“We must land immediately, do not attempt to make the city.”

The searchlight had stopped its sweep and focused upon a patch of earth just to port. It traced the length of the hull on the ground.

“We can only hope, slip port and set down!”

The airship leaned, and slowly slipped to its left. The engines shed minute amounts of lift and the great white hull sunk lower and lower to the rocky ground. She met it with a gentle grating and creaked in protest from the uneven support.

The gauges on the bridge wall showed the steam pressure beginning to fall away, the crew downstairs did their very best to keep the engine speeds to those ordered.

“Fifty revolutions....”

She listed slightly to port.

“Fourty....”

She ceased, and slowly righted.

“Twenty...”

More quiet creaks and groans as the airship shed more lift.

“All stop.”

The ambient noise within the ship tapered away as the machinery came to a stop, and the airscrews slowed and ceased to turn.

Bancroft drew a great breath and expelled a sigh of relief, which masked the noise of the ship beginning to shift again.

Suddenly his worst nightmare became real.

El Adrel began to tilt to starboard, and as she did so, the tilt gained speed. The sound of rock and earth grinding and breaking underneath her hull permeated the entire ship right up to the bridge, and several cries of surprise and dismay echoed from outside in all directions. Bancroft and all present instinctively leaned in the opposite direction as if this would somehow stop her.

“Damn this day, she’s going over!” He muttered. “Steadyyyyy you *bastard ship!*”

Then there was a lurch. The tilt slowed, hesitated, briefly and incrementally continued, and stopped. El Adrel finally came to rest at a raucous angle.

All were silent for quite some time and the only noise was the sound of small objects and ginbottles sliding across the floor in neighboring rooms and in

the spaces underneath them, and the pounding of the rain on the roof and decks. No one dared speak.

Thanks to the demands made by Adelbert Steiner and the events of the day, Bancroft had been awake for the last two days without rest. Any crewman that came to ask him questions quickly deferred to the first mate or tiptoed away at the sight of him as the finalities of securing the tilted ship were made.

Without steam, the radiators had ceased to work and most of the airship had grown cold.

As the activity began to wind down, Bancroft approached Bannister.

“Is the ship out of danger?” He asked.

“Yes, captain, and we’ve inspected the engines. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Right then. Shore her up further in any way you can, I don’t trust things as they are. I suppose clean up and organize anything we haven’t burnt.”

“Aye.”

“And mister Bannister...”

“Yes?”

“When all is said and done, I order all of you to go to sleep.”

Bannister made no remark about the beds having been burnt.

8. Dust

— DUST —

Despite everyone looking outwardly familiar in all but dress, Burmecia was an utterly foreign land, save one thing. The constant dull roar of the rain against the small roof was quite like the calming noise of the sandstorm she remembered. She was always at a loss, and quite disquieted when surrounded by silence. Most were afraid of absence of light, she was afraid of absence of sound.

Shannon missed her home, badly. She missed it almost as much as she missed those familiar to her. She passively stirred her tea with her finger, it had gone lukewarm long since. The Burmecian people had welcomed her with open arms and put her right into this little house, even still, finding appetite or thirst in any great portion eluded her.

There came a gentle ringing at her door, from the prayer bells she had hung over it. She was tempted to remain silent and pretend to not be present, but the ringing came again. It was equally gentle, not increased in hardness or insistency in any way, and this piqued her curiosity.

She slowly got up and stepped to the door. Her sensitive ears detected feet shifting behind it, and she knew her steps had been heard, too.

“Water?” Asked a shatteringly familiar voice
“Water, they said you were here, please, please answer. Please still exist.”

Shannon threw the door open and the rain poured in.

Instantly there were six white arms around her on every side, and instantly she found herself crying.

“Moon, Star, Flower...” She gasped out between sharp pangs.

Sharon, Claire and Nina surrounded their lost temple sister. Familiarity flooded her in a torrent and she found pieces of herself she had set into deep dark corners springing back in vibrant color.

One of them shut the door, she did not know which.

“I missed you so....” She wept.

“Wherever we looked, we couldn’t find you.”
Whispered Sharon. “We heard so much and found nothing. They last spoke of you in Treno, but you

weren't there and there was no trail to follow from there..."

"How did you survive?"

"Me and Claire both went down the trunk and helped each other, we both got hurt when the fire swept the tree away...." Nina related. "We found Sharon much later, far away..."

"Where's....."

"Eileen still hasn't been found." Whispered Claire in grief.

"There was a lot of talk about where you might be, but nothing about Eileen, not at all. We don't think she made it." Nina said, stroking Shannon's forehead.

"We are *so glad* you are safe."

Shannon buried her head between theirs.

"Please don't ever leave."

"We won't, we promise."

What was missing was suddenly whole. Surroundings that were foreign and cold were suddenly familiar to her in no way but those

absolutely essential. Three beautiful and outwardly unhurt faces that comprised the inner fabric of her world, full of emotion and resolution for having found her brought to her comfort and inner rest. She lay against their embrace.

“How did you find me?”

Freya’s nesting instinct returned heavily before their little dwelling even came into view. Just the familiarity of the landmarks was enough to bring it forth. Her grasp around Fratley’s waist tightened and her pace quickened.

The few remaining paces to the door seemed to them both an eternity. She gave one glance to the place where he had secretly slept under the shed eaves, and tightly closed and barred the door behind them.

Instantly she was surrounded by him and being lifted up off the floor by his grasp. Their tails sought each other and corkscrewed together tightly.

“No more wandering, it’s so cold out there, I wish to stay here forever with you.” She breathily said into his face as they undressed each other.

He kissed her.

“Promise.” She demanded.

He kissed her again.

“I promise.” His hands grasped at her softness.
“Take a bath with me.”

William enjoyed time away from his siblings. He did not dislike them in the least and loved his little sister most of all, but he could only truly think when none of them were present.

He had sat himself under one of the stone mantles of the palace foundation, nestled deep into a tiny alcove he did not know the purpose of. Here he had used a rock knife to carve little notches in the stone, one next to another in a small line. The rain came down the stone in a slow moving sheet and made droplets that fell off at the notches, and he had lost himself in a ponderous silence and observed how gently carving the notches into different sizes and shapes produced droplets at different speeds.

He eventually had arranged them such that each made a tempo of falling droplets onto the stone below and these were made to compliment each

other. Water falling on the stone beat a quiet and percussive rhythm that was entirely his own creation, and he took great enjoyment in this small accomplishment. The sound, combined with the ambient noise of the rainfall, lulled him into a nap. The warm clothing his mother had woven for him cushioned his head and back against the stone and made his rest pleasant and soft.

“Hey.” A small voice greeted him.

He came awake suddenly, but without discomfort. It felt as if he had slept for hours. For all he knew, he had. There was no change in the gray, dim sky to indicate how long he had rested.

“Are you okay?” Asked the small unfamiliar brown rat who stood before him. In voice and stature he appeared much older than he.

“Of course I am, I was just tired.” William replied.

“Are you hungry, too?”

“A little bit.”

“I’ll trade you this if you want to come explore with me.” The other rat withdrew a shiny red apple from his pocket.

“That sounds fun, thanks.” William took the apple. “I’m William.”

“I’m —” The other rat hesitated.

William tilted his head expectantly.

“Puck. I’m Puck.” His jaw tightened and he seemed to prepare himself for something.

“It’s nice to meet you.” William responded.

It seemed to William then that Puck was oddly and intensely relieved at his response, and he became confused.

Freya led Fratley by the arm down the narrow thoroughfare. It was Market day, their people were out to partake in it, and they needed to stock her little home with enough vegetables, meat, fruit and spices for two now. Neither of them had attended or seen a market day in a very, very long time.

Here was the familiar Tavern Freya had passed in such a tumultuous state upon her return to Burmecia. Here she lingered to a quizzical Fratley with an inexorable urge to peer into its windows again, one she could not explain.

“Ah, the fire’s throne, I remember our times together here.” He said to her, kissing her neck.”

She did not respond and her ears fell, as she stared transfixed at something through the window.

There were very few inside and the gray light of the rainy day streamed through a largely darkened inner space. Candles and lanterns burned very dim against these beams. A bartender cleaned his shelves and others inside were but a faded blur.

Freya gazed in, without any ability to explain it, upon herself.

Clad in her red dragoon’s tunic and light armor, her rainproof but uncomfortable winged hat, and the crest of her Kingdom’s knightly wards, she lay with her head on the table and almost invisible under her shroud of garments, a cask just beyond her limp right forepaw, its foam having long since settled. Eyes shut, every appendage limp, breathing heavily in a miserable drunken stupor. Freya watched this Ghost intently.

Fratley followed her gaze and let his eyes adjust to the darkness of what lay beyond the window.

For the briefest and most fleeting moment, he was certain he saw that ghost, and understood what

she was seeing before she yanked him from the window and onward, before her step faltered.

He gathered her up.

“Freya...”

“Take me to the door, I need to help her.....I need to help me...”

“Freya, there’s...”

“Take me inside.”

He brought her to the door and threw it open. The few patrons didn’t look up. They both scoured the entire tavern with their keen eyes, but found no ghost.

Bancroft sat on his tilted bridge high atop his tilted airship as a tilted King in his tilted castle. His favorite velvet chair had been burnt getting the vessel to Burmecia, so he sat uncomfortably before the table upon a large wooden crate full of pipefittings that had been dragged up from the engine room.

Here he sat and ran figures on long spools of paper with his fountain pen. He took the tonnage of people, goods, the entirely spent fuel, another unrolled and by now aged document described the weight of the entire furnishings of the airship and he struck these numbers one by one from his tabulations. Being entirely guesswork, and with the entire voyage thrown and scattered to the floor, at this point he was very nearly making it all up and it was most likely all wrong.

“What a thing is this life in developed society.” He lamented. “How does the adage go again?”

He looked around for sympathy and found none in the empty room.

“Numbers, numbers, and then you die.”

He found he had begun writing repeated “8”s in rows, and was now drawing them sideways. He drew a thick line across them all, stabbing them most assuredly to death.

“Ashes I say. Ashes, the lot of it.”

He turned his head and peered out the windows facing the lee of the airship’s tilt. Those on the opposite side streamed with rain, but the overhang of the bridge roof kept the water off of those he

looked through because of the angle. He looked down on cold, hard, motionless, rain-battered earth.

Rocks and cracks and gullies were the consistency of the land, largely grassless moors that had been the cause of the less than ideal landing. He hoped the damage to the ship's bottom was not too great.

He then picked out two moving dots against the gray.

Fumbling for his pocket spyglass, he withdrew it, extended it and put it to his eye.

With the assistance of the optic, he discerned two Burmecian children appearing to follow each other toward the airship, playing as they went.

And instantly he felt as if he were some indifferent omnipresence that was towering over them ominously. An empty laugh escaped him as a dry cough.

For a moment, the stout, old, perpetually furious airship captain was overrun with fantasies of giving it all up and going to play with them in the rain himself.

“Too late for any of that. Far too late...”

He put away his pocket spyglass, tilted the sapphire blue bottle and topped up his glass of gin.

It then began sliding across the tilted table, away from him.

He eyed it suspiciously for a time, and stopped it with his hand before it went out of reach.

He angrily addressed the glass.

“I am well aware my company is detestable at times, but in truth, nobody asked you.”

The glass said nothing. Neither did the spirit within it.

“Come to think of it....” He noted, “I had better have men stationed under us whenever we try again to lift the ship. Can’t have little ones getting crushed....”

Puck and William chased each other, hid in crags, and skipped stones underneath the great airship that had come to rest on the rocky ground just outside their Kingdom.

Drawn by its shadowed presence in the fog of rain, they marveled at its great streamlined riveted form and the gigantic mirror-surfaced knife-edged airscrew propellers at her stern. Here, they took shelter from the rain under the overhanging mass of the hull.

“I had no idea airships were so big, I’ve never seen one before. Its as big as our palace.” William was unable to stop looking upward, fascinated by the immense iron creation.

“I rode this airship here.” Said Puck.

“That’s amazing, I wish I could travel like you. Mama and Dad don’t want any of us to leave Burmecia.” Replied William.

“I’m an adventurer!” Puck declared, and then became downtrodden. “I used to be, anyway...”

“My father says he used to be, and saw every corner of our lands, but now he just wants to stay home with us.”

Puck stared at William in sudden misery.

“Your dad is smart, you should do as he says, you should be very glad he’s still....” He stopped, and his lip quivered.

“What’s wrong?”

Puck began to shed tears, he buried his face in his arms and the folds of his clothing, and tried to turn away from William.

He felt William’s small arms wrap around him from behind.

“It’s okay, I don’t mind that he doesn’t want to do much. He’s very good to us, I love my father.”

Puck coughed.

“What’s your father like?”

Puck bent over and began to wail, and sob heavily. William recoiled at the sound, and understood.

“Please don’t cry, I almost lost my dad too, before I was born.”

“Almost d — doesn’t count!”

“Maybe it’s good to cry.” William embraced him again from behind. “Mum says there is nothing wrong with crying and to never listen to anyone who says there is.”

Puck tried many times to regain mastery over himself from the grief. Unable to succeed fully, he forced out the words he had slowly.

“You’re a good friend, William. Do you know you are the second friend I’ve ever had.”

“Who was the first?” William asked.

“His name was Vivi....”

“Can you tell me about him?”

The Inn was dark, but warm with the heat of stoked fires. Steiner felt some familiarity here, as it was primarily occupied by Alexandrians and Lindblumites who were in Burmecia to contribute to the rebuild effort.

The faces of humans, dwarves, other creatures similar to he were to him a sudden and welcome contrast from nothing but rats.

He still reeled from his blow. He felt as if his entire insides had been torn out of him. Trying to fall back against the familiar bolster of Alexandria as he had in all such instances he had felt dread or

emptiness, he now found absolutely no comfort there. The bolster cracked and failed him.

And here came through the air his name, and then again, and a third time.

He looked up.

“Adelbert Steiner?” A portly Burmecian asked.

He glared up silently, displeased at having had his silent misery interrupted.

The rat stared back.

“To whom do I speak?” Steiner asked.

“I’m Dónal, parchment carrier in service to my Kingdom.” The rat replied.

“Do you require some sort of medallion or accolade?” Steiner growled.

“I require to know if you are Adelbert Steiner.”

“Yes, I am.”

“I bear a parchment for you sent to your last known location within the Kingdom. I did not find you there, so I have been looking.”

Dónal offered up a leather binding and Steiner snatched it. It bore the Alexandrian Royal crest.

“From whom?”

“Alexandria, more than that I do not and am not permitted to know.” Dónal said. “It is not our business. I am grateful for this parchment’s successful conveyance. Farewell!”

Dónal quietly stepped out of the dark room before Steiner could respond.

He opened the binding and withdrew the paper within it. His eyes picked out the seal and signature first and recognized them instantly.

Adelbert Steiner

Your presence is hereby requested forthwith within the Queen’s Chamber of Alexandria Castle as soon as you are able.

You are requested to accept the Red Maltese in honor of your distinguished service to our Kingdom, and to accept the role of Supreme Commander of all forces military and Civilian within this Kingdom.

It had long been my intent to see this done since I ascended this throne, but the unfortunate

**circumstances regarding my general and your
beloved have expedited my decision.**

**I will miss her, but most assuredly not as much
as you do now.**

I have no words to tell you how sorry I am.

I miss you, and love you very much.

Dagger

Steiner resisted the urge to rip up the letter.

How did she know?

Freya. Somehow. A carrier pigeon, a spell,
intuitive connection, something. Damn her.

Their family was too close knit for Garnet *not* to
know.

A wayward airship captain trudged and splashed
through the inundated Burmecian cobblestone road
followed by an entourage of his crew, laboriously
pulling an immense load on a skid behind him. The
drainage here had evidently not been fixed yet, and
due to the unevenness of the stone, the skid had been
a wagon up until a short time before when the

wheels had disintegrated. Bancroft had received a tip about a carpenter who had attempted to reinstate his works in this part of the city and had been searching for him all day.

The sound of a hammer through the rain finally brought him out of that rain and through a nearby door. He smiled broadly at the warmth and dryness and the line of beautifully crafted ornamentation, bulwark, tool handles and most importantly, some sparse examples of newly built furniture along the wall.

The workshop was in total disarray, but well stocked and he recognized many tools from Lindblum, new saw blades of fine steels, files and rasps, chisels, a brand new block plane almost as long as he was, and especially a large, burly and finely polished copper-jawed vise sitting on the floor, still half way in its transport crate. All the fruits of his home city's industrial engine.

“Greetings!” He bellowed.

An old rat looked up from his work on a bell hangar.

“Yes?”

“I captain the airship El Adrel, which now lies stricken outside this city. Due to unfortunate circumstances, my entire vessel requires re-furnishing. Are you familiar with pre-aviation era Crellin style cabinetry and ornamentation my good man?”

“No.” The rat replied.

“Then I shall furnish you with drawings. Bannister, Webb, Moran!”

Three of the crew dragged in the skid from the rain. Bancroft threw the burlap cover off its load. The airship’s safe and its complex locking mechanism gleamed in the light of the lanterns.

“Set your price and you shall be thoroughly compensated.”

The old rat stared at it flatly, and then looked to Bancroft and spread his arms.

“Lindblum’s currency isn’t worth much here. I may have more tools than I’ve ever had before, but I don’t trust foreign steel or foreign craftsmanship, and right now they are useless to me anyway because this place is still a wreck. I only had enough help to finish my roof and close in the holes in the wall and windows before they were called away to

somewhere else. I've been doing what I can, and waiting for them to return since."

In his hurry and single-mindedness upon his intended task, the clutter had delayed his accurate assessment of the true state of affairs. The new tools sat upon damaged workbenches, the windows were poorly boarded over. The roof joists were held in place with a great deal of falsework. Block and tackle and stone lay everywhere. Candlesticks and lamps were devoid of candles, the floor tile was cracked, smashed and even cratered in many places. Whatever he could see, he quickly discerned was made worse by what he could not see.

Bancroft shouted out the door.

"Gentlemen, come hither!"

Ten more men including the ship's chief engineer marched into the workshop.

"I see that bringing you all here was not the waste of time I feared it would be. In this instance my instinct and planning was impeccable. You shall follow this man's instructions to the letter!"

"Aye!" They all responded in not-quite-perfect unison.

Bancroft turned to the Burmecian. “Consider us in your service until this fine establishment is *back* in service.”

At this he smiled, and turned away.

“You can come out, you know. It looks like it’s finally time to finish setting this place right.”

A tiny young rat slowly peeked his head out from inside of a box.

“This is Kenneth. He’s my helper and my apprentice. Kenneth, it looks like these people will do anything we say.”

“Will they make mama feel better?”

All were silent as stone.

“Are you sure?” Kal asked as he fussed over his wife. “If even one of that batch of turnips was rotten, I’ll throw them all away and wash out the box with soap.”

“I’m certain, my darling, there’s no need to throw away our produce when I remember how it felt the first time.”

She pressed his forepaw against her belly.

“Besides, it isn’t like we didn’t know this would happen...”

Kal went red and laughed softly.

“Are — are you sure we’ll be able to...”

“Yes.”

“I’m — gonna be a father...”

Wei began to laugh and rose against his grasp.

“You already *are* a father!”

“I’m going to be one *again*!”

Kal leapt from the bed and ran out of the house, calling for his children.

Wei looked after him as he went, and slowly got to her feet to follow him. Her stomach still churned, but the warmth and intense gratitude inside her brought stability.

Outside, Kal had already vanished into the streets just as he had the first time she had discovered she bore children. She steadied herself against the garden wall.

“Wei...”

Lyra, the wife of their neighboring household, approached her.

“Hello Lyra, I’m so happy to see...”

“Wei, you’re with child!”

Wei blushed and could not resist a smile.

“How did you know?”

Lyra paused.

“Because I am too....” She instantly looked at the ground and went equally red. In an instant Wei had gently clasped both her forepaws in hers.

“I *knew* you and Douglas would succeed, it was just a matter of time. I am *so happy for you*.”

Lyra’s uncontrollable smile was suddenly marred by visible queasiness.

“I have a potion to help with that, come inside with me, I need some too.”

“You again.” Steiner made no effort to hide his dismay.

“Yes, *me again.*” Bancroft proudly declared.

Despite knowing they would inevitably run into each other in the Inn, Steiner had tried to avoid it as one would avoid a plague.

Bancroft extended his enormous hand.

“I believe we got off on the wrong foot.”

Steiner hesitated and then suspiciously took Bancroft’s hand. Bancroft immediately did all the shaking.

“I already know your name and standing and you already know my standing. I am at this moment simply Bancroft Ellenroad.”

“And how may I help you?” Steiner asked anything but earnestly.

“I think the question, really, is how may *I* help *you.*”

Steiner raised an eyebrow.

“I do not in any way understand the circumstances surrounding your misery but I assume it is a matter most serious.”

“Yes and it is none of your concern.”

There was a long silence.

Steiner broke it. "I have come to question the nature of my service." He thought for a moment. "And the nature of my entire life."

Bancroft narrowed his eyes.

"Have you ever had cause to question these things?"

"My service? Continuously. My Life? Only once, when I *married*." The last word rolled off Bancroft's tongue with contempt.

"Why?"

"Because life is full of un-ideals."

"Only a life badly lived is full of those." Steiner insisted.

"I could not disagree more strongly." Bancroft shook his head.

"What is the nature of your service?"

"I am a captain in the fleet of the Civil Service."

"You serve your Kingdom."

“Good heavens no. Only in the loosest sense. I primarily serve myself.”

Steiner’s expression flooded with disgust.

“My airship performs tasks and jobs based on who is willing to pay for them. It just so happens that many of these errands, including this most recent one, have been requested and paid for by my Regency. My airship lives in Lindblum and receives all the care it requires to continue to operate there, but I must pay for that care and make the ship earn her keep. I fly under my Kingdom’s flag, and am entitled to all the protections and services of that Kingdom, but my airship is my own.”

“You are no different than a commoner and his market carriage!” Steiner declared, aghast. “You are *paid* for your service?”

Bancroft was equally aghast. “My good man, do you mean to tell me that you are *not* compensated for your service?”

Steiner stared at him. This man was suddenly more foreign to him than the rats of Burmecia, the monsters of the evil forest, the black mages, or those he had met in Terra.

“It is unconscionable to me how any man could demand payment from his Kingdom for his service, beyond that of shelter, sustenance, and the knowledge that that Kingdom and its lands and peoples are healthy and prosperous.” Steiner firmly stated. “I will always believe this, but my recent misfortune has made me question my own priorities and if I wish to continue that service.”

Bancroft did not know how to respond.

“A paragon of Virtue.” He finally said, without a hint of his usual sarcasm. “Or a sap of the highest order.”

Steiner was filled with rage but quieted when Bancroft brought his hand up and continued, “I am convinced it is the former.”

“How could you be so cynical?” Steiner asked.

“Knight, I am a product of a supposedly enlightened. We are a culture of those who question all we see around us and, quite often, laugh at it. Many of my countrymen have grown cynical with the prosperity begotten by our industrial nation. It is the height of cruel irony, and I was not aware of how pervasive the mindset was, truly, until this very conversation. The middle class we are now seeing

grow so rapidly in Lindblum is a phenomenon recorded nowhere else in recorded history.”

“What is a middle class?” Steiner asked.

Bancroft was again stunned silent. He had never turned over in his mind how Alexandria essentially had none.

“The middle class is what we call commoners, as you would know them, who have achieved the ability to gain power and wealth through knowledge and merit only.

“How does one gain power or wealth with no bloodline, inheritance or highly regarded surname?”

“Good god, by their wit, their talent, their drive, their work ethic? Their ability to create what has not been created before and make it useful, the deftness of skilled trade and commerce? The natural qualities of leadership or common sense?”

“These things do not get one very far in Alexandria.”

“We know they bloody don’t and it’s why you have always been a laughing stock to.....” Bancroft abruptly stopped. “And yet we are self absorbed, sarcastic, ungrateful, and such places as Alexandria

produce men with virtue and selflessness far more whole than any countryman of mine...”

Steiner looked at Bancroft ponderously.

“Tradeoffs.....there are always tradeoffs.” Bancroft muttered. “Just as with an airscrew propeller, Lift means drag, more lift begets more drag.”

“Adelbert Steiner, Knight of Alexandria, you are giving me much to think about.”

Leading William by a forepaw, Puck found the engine room now a very different place. The machines rose as monolithic forms in almost pitch darkness devoid of detail, like tombstones. It was as the time he had wandered through the crypt under the palace.

Everything that had churned and spun and darted up and down or back and forth now lay still. The heat had given way to cold, and the dim light had given way to candlelit darkness.

Specifically one candle.

He found Giffard polishing, cleaning and attentively adjusting all he surveyed by its light. It was cold, and he visibly shivered now and again.

“Are you cold?”

Giffard was surprised to see them.

“Puck!” He knelt. “Yes, I am a little cold.”

“It was so warm in here before, what happened?”

“Without coal there is no fire, without fire there is no steam, and without steam there is no warmth and we cannot heat any of the ship.”

“Why is there no coal?”

“Because our captain is an idiot.” Giffard grinned.

Puck eyed what was very obviously a blanket and a poorly stuffed pillow lying on the hard iron deck floor, near it an empty bowl and spoon.

“Do you want a place to stay that’s warm?”

“Truthfully yes, but I doubt I could afford the Inn.”

“I meant anywhere you like, even the palace.”

“How?” Giffard raised an eyebrow.

Puck looked down and turned his foot apprehensively back and forth. “I’m the King of Burmecia.”

William laughed.

“I had heard that.” Giffard winked.

“What?” Puck asked, indignantly, disliking that Giffard now knew, no matter who told him. It always ruined the way people acted around him. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

William stopped laughing and stared at Puck.

“You never asked me!” Giffard grinned.

“You mean you’re actually....” William stuttered.

Puck wilted and changed the subject. “Giffard, this is my friend William. William, this is Giffard, he is one of the people who knows how to make airships fly and he’s a great teacher.”

“Wait a minute!” William protested.

“Can you tell us what you are doing right now, and can we help you do it?” Puck asked Giffard.

“Certainly. I’m just cleaning everything; this is something you do all the time with steam engines. The bearings where parts rub against each other or turn inside of each other are lubricated by oil that comes down through these little pipes. If any grit or dirt or even dust gets into the bearings, they will get damaged or even get hot and melt whenever the engines turn. Here, take a rag!”

“You’re the King of Burmecia?” William furiously danced up and down on the spot.

“Having sworn Fealty, must I spend my life in servitude?” -Adelbert Steiner

“I know how it feels to lose a loved one.” Freya placed a forepaw on Steiner’s shoulder.

“With respect, I do not know how it feels to hope for or experience the return of one who is lost, either.”

Freya was silenced, and held back sudden tears.

“Sir Fratley was at worst only rumored dead, and he eventually managed to find his way back to you in two ways.”

“You are Family to me, Steiner. You would be whether or not we shared Knighthood.”

“I am grateful, for I am now a man without a country.”

Freya was horrified. “What ever do you mean?”

“Garnet has sent for me, she intends to make me the supreme commander of Alexandria.”

“I would offer you my congratulations, but I fail to see how that makes you a man without a country — it is in fact quite the opposite...”

“Because I no longer feel that my life has a purpose. My purpose was always my country. Alexandria to me was never just a place, it was an idea. But now that Beatrix is gone, and all that awaits me at home is a title and no hope for any meaningful future, that idea is gone.”

“You have a Queen to look after, as you always have.”

“Queen be damned.”

Freya was physically unbalanced by this statement.

“Steiner...”

“Garnet had no business embarking on that entire adventure. None of us did.”

“But the world was changed for the better....”

“For *you* perhaps...” Steiner spat, bitterly. “The war got you your Fratley back. It also destroyed Alexandria, and your home, and Cleyra, and it ended so many thousands of lives, and upturned millions more. It destroyed my beloved even after it was over! If Garnet hadn’t been so childish, Brahne would never have...”

Freya stared directly into Steiner’s eyes.

“Yes, Steiner, she would have. Brahne was an indescribable evil trapped in a body.”

“And furthermore —” Steiner continued. “I would never have been ruined to the point of learning how to question the Queen and Kingdom I made a pledge to protect without regard for myself....”

“Steiner.” Freya clasped his face in her forepaws. “I am certain, quite certain, that you would have learned to do so, anyway. You were always destined to grow, because you had the capacity to do so.”

“To violate one’s oath is not growth.”

“Yes, it absolutely can be.”

“You asked me once long ago, having sworn fealty, must you spend your life in servitude? I remember then I did not know how to answer you, because in many ways I was grappling with the same question. Now I do know, the answer is absolutely not.”

“And how did you arrive at this answer?”

“A great deal of my life was spent searching for something missing, as was yours. But then I found him, and then found him again after losing him, no less than twice. Fratley saved me in every way I could be saved. Fratley always taught me all he learned, and he has learned in his journey to return to me, that life is precious and not to be wasted in servitude to cold and distant ideas. An idea will never show gratitude for what you have done for it. You must serve yourself also.”

“That is selfish and does not align with the principle of Knighthood.”

“Steiner, if you die or become unable to continue, you can’t be anything, let alone a Knight.”

Steiner was silent.

“I thought Fratley lost to me, but I regained him and I shall spend every moment of my life with him forever. If I had given into my despair, he could never have found me or I him, because I would have died. When all seemed lost with his memory, I chose to stay with him because that was when we needed each other the most, not just for him but for me. My grief was such that a part of me sought to run away from him because I could not look upon what had once been. You have not lost Alexandria, it still exists. Even if your Kingdom is changing, you should not turn your back on it, not for Alexandria’s sake but for *yours!*”

Steiner’s gaze shifted from at her to through her. She felt his line of sight meet the crests of the mountains behind her.

“For that same reason, I have decided to renounce my Knighthood.” She said.

Now it was Steiner’s turn to be horrified.

“What?” He asked. “Unimaginable, and hypocrisy of the highest order! You are telling me to remain loyal to my cause while you abandon yours?”

Freya stared at him and then laughed sweetly, and recaptured his face in her forepaws.

“Steiner, Alexandria was everything to you?”

“Yes. To myself and to Beatrix.”

“Fratley was everything to me. Always. I stumbled into my novitiate trying to fill an emptiness it could not fill, but when I found *him*, *he did* fill it. I only progressed, and became a Knight for *him*, and *because* of him.”

“But why do you abandon your cause?”

“Fratley *is* my cause. I love loving him, and being loved *by* him, and being whole because of him.”

Steiner’s face was suddenly flooded with tears and she knew why.

“I wished for that with her.” He fell to his knees. She knelt with him and drew him into a hug.

“I know what you thought of her.” He heaved.

She was silent, and nestled her head into his neck.

“Your Fratley never made himself a tool of war, and he made cheer and wellness wh — wherever he went...” He continued. “I guess we all must face the fire we build.”

El Adrel’s first mate Trevor Bannister, navigator Jay Smar, helmsman Daniel Webb, chief engineer Isambard Forquenot, quartermaster Gianni Garibaldi and watch engineer Henri Giffard all sat in a circle around a large table in the Tavern.

The intense conversation about their mutually unexpected agreement on the beauty of Burmecian women had tapered into a dead ramble about the quality of cloth, no one knew quite how, and had then died quietly.

After a long silence, Webb spoke first.

“Gentlemen...” His voice framed a question he was hesitant to ask.

They all looked at him intently.

“Is it just me, or does our captain seem to be going thoroughly insane?”

They stared at him, and then each other, and all unanimously agreed.

“Yes, he has.”

They brought their flagons together in solidarity and disappointment with a loud clank.

Gray dealt a card. “Two Moons.”

Doyle laid one on the table. “Ribbon.”

Gray sensed an impending loss, and took even more pleasure in it than he would have at a win.

“Do you have any idea how much I missed our card games?” He asked.

Doyle grinned. “I never actually thought we would sit in this tower again and play as we had before. That felt like a dream too far.”

“You can even see the palace spire rising again. It feels almost just like before.” He took Doyle’s forepaw in his. “I am grateful you are still here, and that we have our families. I can’t imagine how horrible it would have been for me if you were killed.”

They were silent for a time, letting the pounding rain against the roof of the tower beside the outer gate fill their ears.

“It’s your turn.” Doyle said quietly, trying to hold back quite a lot.

Gray laid down a card depicting a formidable airship. “Viltgance.”

“Ah, one of Lindblum’s great fighting fleet.” Doyle remarked.

“Yes. Gray said, sullenly.” One of those that didn’t show up when we needed them....twice.”

Doyle’s eyes went wide and he looked past Gray.

“What’s wrong?” Gray asked.

“Why is your card coming right at us?”

Gray whirled out of his chair.

A gilded falcon upon a gigantic shielded ram pierced the clouds over the rocky moorland far beyond the gate. The sky was full of the sound of machinery and airscrew propeller blades thrashing the air, and the thunderous blast of a steam whistle.

In Lindblum, both rats had only ever seen the famed battlecruisers from a great distance and partially hidden behind hangar doors, where they appeared as small as wooden toys. This one filled the sky and came at them faster than anything they had ever seen.

“*BATTLESHIP!*” They both yelled down to anyone who could hear.

Nina and Claire examined their new bars of soap just outside the small shop they had bought them from. It was deliciously fragrant.

“I always wished that soap tasted as good as it smelled.” Claire sighed, causing Nina to giggle.

“What?”

Nina shook her head happily. Just then a large human barged out of a neighboring door, muttering loudly about Gin and tonic.

A loud splashing made itself present above the sound of the drizzling rain, at a different tempo than the man’s steps.

“If I do not see another bottle within five minutes, I swear I shall anatomically invert.”

The splashing became louder and up ran a large long-tongued creature in a chef’s hat. It barreled headlong into Bancroft, and knocked him into the puddles of the street. It remained upright, and towered over him as he struggled.

When he regained his senses and looked up at the Qu, it bellowed at him.

“You want better drink than rain?”

Bancroft screamed.

“Noise not yummy for Quina Quen!”

Bancroft screamed louder and tried to get away, falling deeper into the puddle.

“Hair water resistant! You use olive oil?”

Quina tore a ball of matted, oily hair from the side of Bancroft’s head, and ate it.

Bancroft went silent from equal parts shock and furious indignation as Quina decided how his hair tasted, and then continued screaming in terror.

Nina and Claire had sunk to the cobblestones, their backs against the wall of the shop with laughter, each time they were able to open their eyes to look at the scene, or each other, their laughter only grew harder and more uncontrollably buoyant. They held onto each other to stop from falling over, or from floating away as they both felt they were about to.

Bancroft's screaming tapered off and he stared at the two Cleyran maidens with the same expression of absolute horror.

They were slowly able to quiet their laughter and looked back at him, a giggle escaping every so often. Quina continued to chew on the ball of hair. Bancroft looked at Quina, then back to Claire and Nina, gestured furiously at Quina with both arms, and began screaming again.

Claire and Nina's laughter renewed even stronger than before until tears streamed down their faces.

Originally intending only to upset Bancroft, The silver eighth-piece Puck had paid Quina to run into Bancroft had far exceeded its worth in results.

He watched intently from a corner, his gaze absolutely fixated on the Cleyran girls, unable to

eliminate the hot blush he felt in his face.

Bancroft stumbled into the stone laid clearing behind the city entrance. What filled the sky over Burmecia's inner gate also filled his heart.

“Ohhh, sweet shining Herald of Civilization!” He wrung his hands in the air at the immense flying battleship. “Bring me relief and passage home!”

On the signal mast between the sweeping lift airscrews flew the Regent's Banner. 085, her hull numbers identified the Eighth fleet group, Fifth ship of the line. He knew the ship well.

The battlecruiser Voltaire drew to a stop over the clearing where throngs of Burmecians, Cleyran survivors, and smatterings of every other race present for the rebuild effort pointed up and waved at her. Some already were beginning to slip blocks into place on the greased wooden runners so she could land.

Her tremendous tail boom airscrews feathered and slowly ceased to turn and as she hovered, her empennage of under-planes retracted, pivoting up against the sides of her hull, and after hovering in

the air for a moment, she came down upon the carefully arranged blocks and stone. Her bottom turrets cleared the ground by mere feet, and her tail screw booms nearly threatened to collapse the inner wall such was her length.

He could already make out a very familiar face on the Admiral's sternwalk of the airship. He staggered forward into the rapidly growing crowds.

The Ninth Cid Fabool had not expected such a welcome. White paws extended upward and past the railings of his sternwalk as soon as the airship had come to rest. Happy long-nosed white faces and ears pressed inward toward him.

“Cid!”

“Welcome Regent!”

“Thank you for the relief!”

“We wish you well!”

“Have you seen our King?”

“Long live Cid the Ninth!”

Reaching one forepaw his sleeve was grabbed by twenty more.

A mother lifted her child up almost to the level of his head. “The provisions you sent us last harvest saved my little one from starvation!” She exclaimed. “Olive, this is your savior! He was a friend to our King, and a friend of Burmecia!”

Cid’s grin, which had been widening, turned to a wince of intense emotions.

“I’m so happy to see all of you, too...” He said, almost in-audibly over the commotion.

And then he caught sight of a familiar face trying to push its way through the crowd, gesturing at him with gigantic hands.

Cid shook his head with dismay and acceptance. Of course Bancroft couldn’t have had the decency to delay his arrival, he just had to interrupt this beautiful scene.

Cid took a great delight in watching the sideburned, melon sized head and flailing arms sink beneath the waves of beautiful white rats. He extended both arms down, and everyone who could reach him took hold. He hoisted four rats up onto the sternwalk with him by his own strength, and they all began to talk at once.

“Was your trip a safe one?”

“What can we do for you?”

“I’ve always wanted to meet you and express my gratitude.”

“I have a new roof thanks to what you have been sending!”

“What have you brought for us!”

“I’ve never seen a Battleship before!”

The crowd began to cheer repeatedly. “Regent, Regent, Regent!”

The four Burmecians on the sternwalk gingerly picked up Cid by his robe, sending him into a fit of laughter, and lowered him over the railing, down into more waiting arms. Here he was supposed in the air by the crowd, and moved over its surface like a cork in the water. He was lifted right past Bancroft, who was now screaming expletives and insults at him in frustrated rage. This only flooded him deeper with laughter, which rang out over the crowd. At last he was lowered to the ground and was again surrounded by questions, excitement, and gratitude.

Being a ship of war, Voltaire had limited space for freight and goods. What space she did have was piled high with crates of coal. With the help of a thousand white paws, crates by tens and hundreds were loaded onto a seemingly endless train of wagons.

Each rolled, one by one, out through the inner gate, down the road to the outer gate, and out into the craggy moorland off the beaten path leading to the Kingdom, toward the huge tilted form of airship El Adrel against the gray sky. Cid led the way, doing the lion's share of the work pulling the first wagon over the uneven ground.

“Gingerly now, don’t break the wheels!”

“Cid, thank goodness you’re here.”

“I received your homing pigeon.” Cid smiled with exasperation.

“And not a moment too soon.” Bancroft spluttered, fatigued from the walk over the moors. He had not helped pull a wagon. “It is agreeable to see you, my old friend.”

Cid could not resist drawing the stout old captain into a short embrace.

“What happened to your hair?” Cid asked.

“It has been an utterly dismal time. The gin is almost gone, the ship cannot be slept in, the beds in the Inn are far too soft and I feel as if I am drowning in them whenever I try to rest, the Burmecian food has been intolerable, I have been attacked by a fearsome creature....”

“Why can’t the ship be slept in?”

“Without any steam, there are no working radiators. Surely you know that.”

“Surely *you* have heard of blankets on a bed?” Cid shook his head, his mustache bristling.

“Ah yes, that is another matter entirely.”

“What do you mean?”

“We burnt all of the beds.”

“You *what?*”

“And the blankets. And everything else on the ship, for that matter.”

“*Why!?*” Cid demanded in a mixture of mirth and rage. He then became silent, and understood why.

“Aha, hahahahaha! BahahahahahAHAH!” Cid began to laugh.

Bancroft stared at him in dismay.

“I — I Ahahahaha! I was g — ahahaha!” The Regent’s voice cracked. “I was going to ask how you made it here, but you Hahahah! You just gave me all the explanation I needed!”

Bancroft became incensed and was going to reply, but was stopped as the convulsing man on the floor began to point toward the gin cabinet along the bridge office wall. In that instant he hated his old friend, as he had found himself doing many times before.

“W — why didn’t you burn *that?*”

“A Lindblumite’s gin cabinet is his castle.” He replied, defensively.

“Coal is all well and good, but we can’t take off until the ship is righted.” Bancroft pounded his fist on the table.

“I am in agreeance.” The Chief engineer added. “The last airscrew-masted airship that tried to lift herself from an angle like this ended up falling onto her side.”

“Nicodemus, I believe.” Bannister said.

“I don’t think that jib crane the Burmecians have could right a ship a third this size.”

Cid laughed. “Gentlemen, have none of you ever looked closely at the rams on my battlecruisers?”

The crowds were not nearly as large as they had been when Voltaire arrived, but a large amount of Burmecians and Cleyrans had come out over the moors, following the battlecruiser as she slowly made her way toward El Adrel, and watched with interest.

El Adrel had landed broadside to Burmecia and tilted to her starboard side, away from the city. Voltaire took her place between the city and El Adrel, and hovered in the air, her rear airscrews turning with their blades feathered. She had dropped immense chains, and the crew of El Adrel had drug them over to their stricken ship and laid them out,

attaching them to slings and tying these, and rope and cable, to bollards, cleats, irons and strong points on the ship's superstructure.

High above in the breeze, Voltaire's airmen draped the chains over the top of her shielded bow adjacent the ram, and began securing the links to the sturdy iron ring built through it. The warship illustrated herself to all those present to be as versatile a tool as a pocketknife with fold out additions, while seldom seen in use; every ship of her class had this dragging-iron under the ram bow.

The chains hung in the air, limply.

Cid stood commandingly atop El Adrel's tilted flying bridge with semaphore flags. Bancroft held a spyglass up to his eye, and Bannister stood ready at the polished bronze signal cannon.

"Everyone ready on my command!" Cid raised his fist.

A telegraph lamp flashed back from Voltaire's bridge, the great battleship hung at the ready and bristled with power.

"And, Heave!" Cid shouted, raising the flags high above his head. Bannister pressed the lit slow-match into the cannon's touchhole and it went off with a

bang that knocked everybody but Cid off their feet. From the raised muzzle, a green flare soared high into the gray sky and exploded in a shower of brilliant emerald light.

Voltaire's telegraph lamp flashed four times and the ship gave four whistle blasts, she was filled with the sound of ringing engine telegraphs end to end and the sound of her beating propeller blades changed as they pitched to reverse and the steam engines pulsed. She tilted her lift airscrews back on their trunions as far as they would go. The battlecruiser bore down against the load, the chains pulled tight in the air.

The crowds began to cheer at the incredible sight, but their cheering was drowned out by the noise of power and load.

Creaking and groaning filled the air. Voltaire strained at the chains, the chains protested and shifted, El Adrel's hull groaned.

Voltaire's thrust screws churned faster and faster. A white plume of steam erupted from the top of the ship as the stokers built fires that came up against the boiler safety valves, trying to get every ounce of power she had to give.

The telegraph lamp flashed.

“Voltaire reports full power astern!” Bancroft hissed with invigoration.

The battlecruiser slowly fishtailed as she pulled at the chains. The sound of her engines was so intense that it shook the ground.

It was so subtle that at first they didn’t feel it, but the crowds began to cheer. El Adrel slowly but surely began to tilt upright.

“Lessen, Slack off!” Bancroft shrieked. “We can’t have her going over the other way!”

Cid lowered his flags to an angle, turning his head to the side toward El Adrel’s bow, checking her angle against the horizon.

Voltaire again rang with engine telegraph gongs, and her engines backed off. The jet of steam from the safety valves intensified as the throttle valves on her main engines were choked back, the plume of steam towered hundreds of feet into the air over her and sounded like a continuous cannon blast.

Underneath El Adrel, crewman and civilians alike piled blocks and wedges into the opening gap under the hull near the keel as the airship slowly

came up right as they had been carefully instructed to do so beforehand, so she would not settle again once Voltaire stopped pulling.

The straighter El Adrel sat up, the lower Cid dropped his flags, and the less furiously Voltaire pulled against the chains.

Four of the airship's men and two Burmecians had run completely out of blocks and broken off rocks and stone with a pick axe and shoved them under the blockwork they had set up as the hull inched up and up.

“Wedges, wedges!” They called, furiously looking for any wooden wedges or stops on their wagons and finding none. They all stopped to look at the ship's cook, who stared back at them dumbly, and then ran off.

“Where's he gone!”

No sooner had he vanished behind a crag, than he returned with a stack of finely framed paintings.

“Where did you...”

He furiously rammed them into the gaps.

The Horizon drew nearly level across El Adrel's bow. Cid knew she could very easily fall all the way over if he did not remove the tension at the right time. Too early and she could roll back the way she had come from and crush everyone underneath her, and perhaps even fall on her side. Every bit of experience he had with the dynamics of large flying machines and all the extraneous circumstances he had faced with them came into play here.

Picking the moment, he brought his flags level and waved them sideways.

The telegraph lamp on Voltaire's bridge flashed on and stayed lit. His crew had maintained impeccable readiness; furious and instant ringing of telegraphs before the lamp shutters were even open, the blades of the thrust airscrews instantly feathered before the sound of the engines died away, the lift airscrews quickly turned forward and drew plumb-level.

The chains grew slack. El Adrel stopped moving with a barely detectable lean to the right remaining, balancing almost perfectly on her keel and with only a fraction of her weight leaning upon the blocks on her starboard side.

The cheers erupted from the airships this time before the crowds.

Voltaire let howl her whistle and whoever was on the steam valve refused to let it go.

Voltaire sat heavy and still again upon the slip blocks, and the landing area was again alive with activity. This time not so much huge throngs as small crowds, groups of people, individuals and families and couples watching, children playing. The battlecruiser's crew clambered about inside and outside their airship, making sure she had not overextended her engines, making adjustments, washing the hull and booms and superstructure.

Cid was still surrounded by Burmecians and Cleyrans, as well as those from Lindblum who were still enwrapped in the restoration of Burmecia. Most of them were very eager to go home. The familiar faces of Steiner and Freya stood nearest, Fratley stood against her. Wei and Kal had brought their children. All listened intently to him.

“Voltaire will go on to Alexandria and then return here with further relief supplies on the way back to Lindblum. I will remain here until El Adrel is ready

to depart and take my leave on her. Someone has to make sure that Bancroft doesn't drunkenly run her into a mountainside on our way home."

"You're right." Smiled Steiner.

"Young Adelbert, how I have missed you! What are you doing here? I expected Voltaire's crew would find you in Alexandria! How is Garnet?"

No sound came from Steiner's mouth when he opened it to reply.

Others quickly overtook him.

"We're so glad you are going to stay here with us. What can I do for you?" One rat asked.

"Do you need a place to stay?" Asked another.

"Come to think of it, I do. A battleship has very Spartan accommodations." Cid replied, causing an uncontrollable grin in who had asked him.

"Steiner!" He gestured to the Voltaire. "Do you need a way home?"

"I — had planned to go on foot. I know room for passengers is at a premium on a ship of war."

"Look harder."

It took Steiner another glance, and a moment to realize that the flags flying from the signal mast were the Alexandrian Royal banner, and a pendant bearing the crest of the Knights of Pluto.

“You shall have the Admiral’s quarters.”

He recognized the beginnings of protest in Steiner and raised his hand.

“I *insist*. It is the very least I can do.”

Steiner pondered for a long time.

“I accept.”

With the Alexandrian banners flying, Voltaire departed into the rainy gray painted sky, and with her departed Adelbert Steiner.

They watched the ship until she had nearly disappeared, and then went into the city. The small crowd that followed him slowly broke up with fond words and gestures as those who comprised it began to return to their work, or to their homes.

Wei lifted up her youngest daughter and Cid gave her a kiss on both cheeks before the family bid them

farewell.

Soon all who remained with him were Freya and Fratley.

As they went, Cid surveyed all that was before him, and his expression turned from resolute, to wistful, to ponderous, to grim, to miserable.

“This is far worse than Lindblum ever was, even now.”

“Yes and, despite your help, our people lack direction because of the death of our King. People have finally begun to accept he isn’t coming back, and the grief in the air hangs colder than the rain in winter. It has made everything almost pointless for them.”

“I am no stranger to that feeling. Your King Artemus was a *dear* friend to me, Freya. I miss him more each day, and it makes matters worse knowing that I killed him.”

“Brahne and Odin killed him, Cid.”

“If I had mobilized the fleet quickly instead of sitting on my laurels, Brahne would have never had the chance. He would be alive, as would the people of Cleyra. The blame lies with my complacency.”

Neither Freya nor Fratley could disagree with him.

“What of Puck?” Cid asked, sadly. “He is your King, now.”

Freya and he looked at each other and passed a million unspoken words.

“He still has a childhood to live out and is intent on doing so.” She replied quietly.

“And that is understandable.”

He stopped as they went under the arch of a still ruined bridge, and took a proper look at them both.

“Freya, you look *completely* different from when I last saw you.”

“I haven’t the reason for my usual garb anymore.”

“That’s not what I meant.” He smiled. “You don’t look weary anymore. The whole time I knew you, I never knew you to look so relaxed, your eyes are different, your stride is different...”

Freya pressed closer to Fratley and laid her head on him. “It is because blessings are as tangible as sunbeams, Regent. And I have received one.”

“Well now, then this must be exactly who I suspected it to be. We haven’t been properly introduced. Freya, is this the one who your endless search for brought me to my Kingdom? I had heard only murmurs that you had regained him...”

Fratley bowed to him.

“Sir Fratley, it is gratifying to finally meet you, and to know you have been found.”

“Not half as gratifying as it is to *be found*, Regent.”

“Both of you call me Cid, dammit!”

He continued looking them over.

“I am so happy to see you together at last, and I envy you.”

“Why?”

“Love of someone lost and regained is far more powerful than any other. Love unencumbered the matters of state surrounding you is love as it is meant to be felt. These are things I will only know, and never experience myself. Walk in green fields, touch in shadow, laugh in light. This is the stuff of life.”

Freya and Fratley said nothing, only looked at each other.

“There is a matter of some importance I must speak with you about.”

“Anything, Cid.” Freya replied.

“Bringing coal to my idiot friend and his airship was *not* the main reason I came here. It merely gave me a date to do so.”

They nodded.

“First I wanted to see the restoration for myself, secondly I have a promise I want to make to the new King, and all who serve him, and a gift to give. Do you know where Puck might be found?”

“No, we never do.”

“I see. Then please find him, if you can, and I will try as well. I wish to arrange a meeting at the palace between he and my fleet admiral at the soonest possible time; he stayed behind in Burmecia with me when Voltaire left. You would not have seen him, he is a very quiet man. I wish for you both to be present at this meeting.”

“We will try to find Puck.”

“Thank you.” Cid nodded. “And if by some misfortune you cannot find him before my fleet admiral and I return to Lindblum aboard El Adrel, please convey this gift to him yourselves.”

Cid withdrew a small jeweler’s box from his breast pocket and opened it. Inside lay a small blue stone.

“If he can be found and the meeting can be arranged, please bring this with you. We will present it together.”

“What is it?”

“This is a twinstone.” Cid explained. “A Cleyran survivor gave this and its sister stone to me as a token of appreciation. Appreciation for what I still do not know. It will seek to find its sister in times of trouble, and can carry messages across impossible distances to the other stone no matter the distance between them. My fleet admiral keeps the sister stone, if Puck or this Kingdom ever again needs my help, all he has to do is call for help through this one.”

Despite the work still continuing, the palace had been transformed. The shining new pearly stoned roof outdid even its former grandeur, the old one had not shewn so bright and new for hundreds of years since its last renovation, in a time long vanished from living memory. The spire again pierced the foggy sky.

Everyone including Freya had become so used to the gaping hole in the roof, the original warm and dry torch-lit darkness of the interior was at this moment less familiar.

The statues and masonry carvings and smooth floor flickered in the ancient orange light, and the smoke made the aethereal light from the few stained glass windows into well defined, subdued rainbow beams.

Freya followed Fratley and led Puck by the hand to the base of the statue of the Protector, where hushed figures waited in the shadows. One figure became very quickly recognizable as Cid. Another made itself out to be a dejected and restless Bancroft. The third was large and unfamiliar.

“Lord Puck.” Cid bowed.

“It’s just Puck, ya know.”

Cid laughed. "I am so glad to see you. How are you?"

"I miss my father." For a fraction of a second, Puck lost his composure, and then suddenly regained it. "But that's more than can be said for a lot of others here."

"I miss him too. Quite badly." Cid nodded. "And we are here to give you something I wish I could have given him."

Freya withdrew the small box from her downy white tunic and gave it to Puck.

"What is it?" He asked.

Cid turned to the other figure, who had been looking up quietly at the gigantic stone likeness of the Protector. A truly immense man with a long, dark, thick beard and a brow so deep, his eyes could barely be seen in the dim light. His face was worn and harsh and furrowed, but radiated a peculiar gentleness from a place far behind its exterior. He towered a head higher than Cid, and was as broad-shouldered as a cannon carriage.

To all of them, he seemed as large as the statue.

“This is Kurn. He is my fleet admiral.” Cid introduced him.

“That is a twinstone.” Kurn spoke.

Puck fondled the small blue stone and then asked, “Where is its twin?”

Kurn withdrew an identical stone from his pocket. “I possess it.”

“What’s it for?”

“It is for if you, or anyone you love, or your Kingdom, ever need help.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Watch.”

Kurn moved the stone he held to his lips, and whispered something very quietly to it.

It began to glow, and it drew a pencil-thin blue line of light through the air to the stone Puck held, which also glowed. He heard his stone whisper, and held it to his ear.

“Long live the King.” He heard Kurn’s voice near his ear as if Kurn himself had placed his mouth inches from it.

The stones remained connected by the line of light, even when Puck tried to pass his forepaw through it.

“These stones are one, separate only in body.” Kurn explained. “As you see, one stone will always point the way to the other. All you need do is ask for help, and I will hear you, and be guided to you no matter the weather or distance.”

“These stones carry our voices?” Puck asked.

“Our feelings.” Kurn responded.

Puck again tried to grasp the tendril of light.

“You try.” Kurn quietly encouraged.

Puck looked at his stone for a long time. So long, that to all present the rain against the palace roof began to deafen them.

The look of intense sorrow again crossed Puck’s face and he lifted the stone to his mouth and nearly kissed it.

The line of light between the stones was suddenly as a lightning bolt. Kurn inhaled sharply as the one in his hand exploded into an electric blue star that lit the palace brighter than the sun on the clearest day.

The bones in his hand were visible. Everyone recoiled and shielded their eyes.

“I want my father back!” Puck’s voice echoed up into the high vaulted ceiling as the blue explosion faded.

Kurn had thrown the stone clear of him. It lay on the floor, its blue glow still radiating in the darkness. The flesh of his hand in which he had held it smoked and sizzled as if he had stuck it into a cooking pot.

All present stared in shock.

“I’m — I’m sorry!” Puck pleaded. “I didn’t even say anyth...”

“I know you didn’t.” Kurn gritted his teeth and shook his smoking hand, trying to cool it in the air. “There is *nothing* to be sorry for, little one.”

The silence was deafening. Kurn’s hand eventually cooled, and he picked up the stone, touching it gingerly first to see if it too had cooled.

Freya was overwhelmed with the desire to go to Puck and comfort him, and she did so. Looking at the child King, and at Kurn, she felt a schism in the air.

She drew Puck's head near her bosom and he did not resist, and shut his eyes. She gently stroked his hair.

"With respect, Admiral..." Freya began. All turned to look at her.

"The Twinstone is as impressive an item as it is beautiful a gesture, it very clearly serves its purpose. But you will forgive me if I am suspicious of how a Human, with no ties to our Kingdom or peoples, and who was uninvolved with any defense of Burmecia or Cleyra, would respond to a call for help."

She looked directly at Cid.

"We could not rely on you last time, and look at what was just sent between those stones. There is far more of it that you cannot hear or see or feel in this place because of that."

A nervous silence prevailed. Cid shifted on his feet with extreme and visible discomfort and apprehension, his eyes darting between she and Kurn.

"You are right to say these things." Kurn replied, quietly. He then turned. "Nella?" He asked into the dark.

Before his voice had finished echoing in the cavernous space, they heard soft footsteps.

“Please allow me to show you that my interests in your people and my understanding for them is genuine.”

A beautiful white rat drew towards them. Such was her beauty that all those present widened their eyes to better see her in the dimness.

Her face was beautiful; the subtle sweep of her nose was framed by large soulful deep eyes and delicate upturned eyebrows. She trailed long, healthy, clean hair, much lighter than their people’s usual golden blonde but not quite the moonlit white of Freya’s. Her hands and feet were small, her tail was short and only its tip ran along the floor. She had the shape of a fertility idol; large breasts and deep thighs overwhelmed her silken gown and filled the air around her with softness. Her skin was very fair and reflected the torch light like water.

For a moment, Freya was overwhelmed with a childish worry that she would lose Fratley to her.

The beautiful rat went directly to Kurn’s extended arm and pressed herself to him.

It was Freya who spoke first.

“You’re Cleyran!”

She smiled and nodded at Freya.

“You’re correct.” Kurn replied, wrapping his other arm around her. “And Nella is my wife.”

All present stared.

He continued. “I found her dying of thirst in the Vube desert while the fleet was searching for survivors from what the mad idiot queen did to the tree. Before I met her, I walked this world as a dead man. I restored her to health in body, and she planted in me a garden which still grows. She has softened Lindblum with her presence. She has taught and is still teaching me her ways. I cannot be without her. I cannot even be out of sight of her. Another room is too far away. Without Nella I would die a thousand deaths.”

“Remember that petition I mentioned, about ending the Festival of the Hunt?” Cid asked Bancroft.

“All life is to be cherished.” Nella spoke in a soft, light voice. “This is what my people believe, it is what I know to be true. No being that feels should ever be made to suffer, or lose another it cares for.”

“And to think that a people such as this, who produced a woman such as you, were almost erased.” Kurn spoke softly, but his voice ran thick with rage. “So yes, Freya Crescent of Burmecia, I do care, immensely, about both your peoples, as Cleyrans originated here. I am sworn to protect Burmecia as I am sworn to protect Lindblum and I will come if called as fast as airscrew propeller or my own feet, if necessary, will carry me.”

Freya was utterly satisfied. She bowed to Kurn.

“Damn!” Fratley brought his foot down hard on the floor. Everyone turned to him.

“What’s wrong, my love?” Freya asked.

“Forgive me, forgive my absent mindedness!” Fratley clenched his fists.

“What’s to forgive, dear boy?” Bancroft finally spoke up.

Fratley stepped toward Nella and looked right into her eyes. “Nella, the great Tree of Cleyra has been reborn.”

At first it did not register, but suddenly her eyes grew wide and shimmered in the torchlight.

“*What?*” Kurn asked, stepping toward him with her.

“*What!?*” Exclaimed Cid.

“*I — is this true?*” Nella began to weep.

Bancroft, Freya and Puck all nodded in confirmation.

“We were there.” Puck said.

“We all saw it happen.” Smiled Freya

“I almost ran into it with my airship.” Bancroft excitedly declared, causing the ecstatic Cid to shoot him a furious glance.

Nella was overwhelmed and sunk her face into the folds of Kurn’s jacket collar. He kissed downward onto her forehead and held her tightly as she cried into him.

Cid jiggled up and down on the spot. “I will ask how this happened later, oh how furious I am to not have been able to see the reactions of the survivors or the Burmecian people when you told them! Please tell me, tell me what was it like when you did?”

Fratley stared at Cid, nonplussed.

“Nobody told *any of you?*” He asked.

Bancroft, Freya and Puck all went red in the face.

“Wait, you didn’t tell them?” Fratley asked indignantly. “I’m the first to tell any of them?”

“I forgot.” Freya said, abruptly biting her lip at what she had said.

“So did I.” Said Puck.

Fratley raised both his forepaws in front of his face and shook them.

Freya’s eyes shut against a tide of intense laughter. She struggled to hold it back but it began to escape as squeaks. Eventually her dam of composure broke and the palace was flooded with her laughter even more wholly than it had been a short time before with blue light from the twinstone.

“Oh Frabjous Day!” Bancroft exclaimed sheepishly underneath the buoyant joyful sound, breaking the spell.

He looked at she and Fratley. “Everyone knows you two were too busy locked in the throws of passionate love, and the better for it.” He turned to Cid. “My lord regent I suppose one could say that I forgot as well due to drinking myself into a violent

stupor over the — incident....regarding the amount of fuel on shipboard, and having no bed to sleep on it slipped my mind. At least these two had a bed to do all that sleeping and quite a bit *more* in, they should have told everyone at this point due to the larger proportion of rest and relaxation!” Bancroft stamped his foot with emphasis.

“I am a man of institution and of civilization, I am a man of perpetual indignance and indulgence, I am of port and city creature comforts, hot and cold running water, furnishings and transit. I am truly ill equipped to be of any use to a place as close to the raw nature of things as this, especially while it is recovering from a war.”

Cid had not heard him, and was bounding away across the palace.

Bancroft hurriedly turned to the others and opened his hands. “My lord regent is a level thinker when it counts but when frivolity and joy ggrrrrrips him, also a man of passion and impulse, we must give chase!”

Bancroft did so at a tremendous rate of speed.

Puck followed suit.

Fratley took Freya by the hand and began to run, she followed step, but lagged behind him. He could always run faster than her, but she looked back over her shoulder. He sensed her dragging on him and slowed, and followed her gaze.

Kurn and Nella had stayed behind, and he was in the midst of trapping her laughter in a deep kiss.

Freya, Fratley and Puck trailed Bancroft through a busy market in a square to a small monastery at its edge still covered in scaffolding.

Cid had gone up the belltower, and stood perched on the roof outboard of the bell gallery with the sheave rope in his hands. He furiously rang the bell, back and forth, with his entire body weight.

“Town Meeting!” He shouted down. *“TOWN MEETING!”*

People from the market and all around had heard the bell and gathered to watch the strange spectacle, and those in the tower, including the bellkeeper came out as well.

“The tower is still under repair! What are you doing up there?” The rat cupped his paws and

shouted up.

“Reporting by airship, *The Great Tree of Cleyra lives!*” Cid screamed down so powerfully his voice split.

“He speaks the truth!” Freya and Fratley echoed in the crowd.

Those gathered first began to dumbly look at each other, and then express disbelief, then shock, then joy. Cleyran survivors were easily visible by the intensity of these reactions.

“*TOWN MEETING BLAST IT ALL!*” Cid screamed.

Then, the bell hangar beams broke. Cid, the beams, the sheave wheel and the gigantic bell disappeared from view and went crashing down the tower, to the horror of all who watched. On the way down, plumes of masonry dust issued from the windows at each story, one after the other.

They all found him in a crumped heap in the base of the tower with the Bell, in a pile of masonry and beams. His arm was sprained, and he was laughing.

Bancroft looked to Freya and Fratley as those who had beaten them inside came to Cid’s

assistance.

“I will reiterate, our Regent is a man of passion, and imagination. It is why the star of Lindblum shines so brightly against the constellation of this world” He said to them, beaming at the Cid.

William found Puck in the graveyard.

As he approached, he saw Puck had made something in the overhang of the entrance to an ancient crypt vault.

“Whatchya doing, King Puck?”

Puck startled and whirled and placed himself instinctively between William and the curiosity. His face was wet and red, he had been crying. For a moment it seemed to William as if he would defend what was behind him to the death.

“What’s the matter?”

Puck fell to his knees. “Don’t — don’t call me that, I hate it. I just call me Puck, like before.”

“What’s that?” William pointed behind him.

“It’s nothing.” Puck quavered.

“Can I see?”

“No.”

“I can kind of already see.”

“Then why did you ask?”

“Who’s the guy in the pointy hat?”

Puck fell. He was unable to even stand against the force of his own grief.

William saw the shrine that Puck had built in its entirety. A tall and regal Burmecian that he recognized as the now lost King only due to what his parents had shown him was depicted on paintings, a drawing he was sure Puck had made himself, the front faces of the onepiece coins of their Kingdom, a small wooden carving chopped away from a larger piece, and a shockingly realistic print from another machine he had seen in Lindblum, a camera. There were buttons and marbles, a wooden dragon, a belt buckle, a lovingly unfolded letter.

Next to this were more pictures, almost entirely drawings and some quite beautiful, of a black mage in a pointed hat. Under these lay an obviously faked ticket to an Alexandrian play.

“Your dad and, is this.....Vivi?”

“Wh — when I’m King...” Puck gulped. “When I’m King, I’ll make a monument for them. It will be taller than the whole s — sky...”

“No, Puck. This is perfect, this is more perfect than any monument.”

Puck wailed. William held him tightly.

“And you already are King.”

“No. No!” He protested. “I don’t care about war, or spears, or fighting, or money, or power, or any of that stuff a Burmecian king should care about! I don’t care! I’d be such a bad King, I only care about dad and Vivi!”

“And that is why you will make such a good King...” William declared softly.

Bancroft, having adequately flooded himself with alcohol, stumbled into the old Inn.

On the way down the long, fragrant, dim hallway toward his room, he was arrested by a sound completely unfamiliar to him. He knew Kurn and Nella had been staying here, but he had now evidently discovered the exact room.

Behind the door he heard them making love. The heavy breathing could only belong to someone with Kurn's stature, and Nella's gasps and moans and squeaks and cries were unmistakable. The sound of blankets being thrashed around and bodies finding any way they could to be closer together was interrupted briefly and sporadically with her giggles and I love yous.

He didn't want to listen, but he was rooted to the spot by the utterly foreign sounds and emotions, that poured out from their tightly shut door.

He became lost in thought. He thought himself across a great distance. His mind flew over the Vube desert, across the mountain range, over Qu's marsh and through the Falcon's gate to his beloved towering glistening Lindblum. He flew through the window of the small and stately manor house he occupied and found his wife furiously folding and stacking the clothes from the wicker hamper, fussing over frayed or threadbare collars, and talking angrily to herself.

If one married for practicality and because one regarded a future full of endless arguments and perpetually unrestful mediocrity as a fair price to pay for that practicality, as he had always been

taught, his marriage to Agatha Bettencourt was a benchmark. After their first three weeks, sleeping in the same wide bed with a clear mile between them had proven far too close for comfort.

Moving briskly to separate bedrooms thereafter, the first arrangement did not work much better due to the bedrooms being on the same floor and the arguments and criticism that resulted when they saw each other every morning. It was only after he had moved to the first floor and she the third, as his knees hurt him on long flights of stairs, that sufficient distance for diplomacy had been achieved.

Agatha quite often beat him with her purse. He had taken to throwing her up flights of stairs shrieking like an alley cat when arguments became heated and he became vexed. He had stopped the practice when she had discovered being at the top of the stairs afforded her an advantage and one day their library's heaviest bookshelf came back down the stairs at him, followed by a grand piano and a fully occupied china cabinet. From that moment on, he had only ever thrown her down stairs.

The only physical contact they had ever shared was in a fight, or to help each other dress in absurd and expensive clothing for an expensive outing lined

with superficialities; clothing requiring as many adjustments and assembly at the back as the machinery in a factory.

He hated his wife. He had married her *because* he hated her. For that is what the institution of marriage *was*, to find someone you could hate and be hated by in a tolerable manner and accept the sentence of living in the same house for financial gains and the production of offspring.

At least, that was what he had always been told.

His mind was ripped from Agatha's folding, out the window, away from Lindblum and back across the distance to his body by a powerful sound.

Nella was screaming. His mind crossed and could not understand what he was hearing. He had only ever heard someone scream in pain before, but this was the opposite. Her voice was full of joy and relief, and he heard the wet smack and hushed whines of those screams plugged by a kiss. More intense thrashing, it rattled the door and the floor.

Bancroft was not aware that a female of any kind could be as happy as Nella sounded. Gasping and Moaning tapered into whispers, which then turned into soft crying. He heard Kurn whispering too, but

his voice was so deep he could not discern about what.

“I wish we could have children...” He heard her say, tearfully.

Bancroft and his wife had always hated children.

“There, *there see?*” Puck pointed furiously and William tried to follow his finger.

“I can’t see, the leaves are in the way.” William whispered frustratedly. The same ivy on the wall that concealed them also blocked their view.

William inched his way higher to a better vantage point, and gasped.

“*Those are Cleyrans?*”

“The Cleyran *Dancing Maidens.*” Puck proudly whispered back.

Sharon, Shannon, Claire and Nina were practicing dance under the arches of the monastery. Their bare backs and bellies instantly caught his eye. His gaze became absolutely fixated on one of the four, with the darker hair.

“Is that one Nina?”

“Which one, let me see.” Puck clambered higher.

“Ow, my foot!” William winced.

“Sorry.” Puck peered out. “The dark haired one? No, no that one’s Claire. Nina is over there on the side.”

“Claire?” William asked.

“Yes, Claire.”

“Claire.”

“Yes!”

“Claire is so beautiful...”

William felt his face burning in a blush. He was unable to look away to see Puck’s face the same color.

“Nina is my favorite.” He stammered.

“What if they see us?” William asked, embarrassed.

“Then we jump, and die like men!”

“Do you think...”

“What?”

“Do you think that would make them laugh?”

Puck’s blush intensified so much it ran to his eartips.

“I — I hope so...”

“Do you think we should do it now then?”

Freya had found the letter just under their door. Wei and Kal had asked she and Fratley to come over for a dinner at their dwelling whenever they wished. They had done so that very evening.

The steak dinner had filled them wholly and as they sat contentedly in the dim candlelight, Wei softly put her children to bed.

“We wanted you to come to properly express our gratitude.” Kal said.

“How do you mean?” Freya asked.

“Zidane saved me from certain death when that statue nearly fell on me.” Kal related. ‘But you fought to save this Kingdom, and our King, and all of us. You fought fiends of the mad queen, and that

awful Alexandrian swordswoman. Without you both fighting for all of us, neither of us would have escaped to Lindblum.’ His voice dropped to a near whisper. “And our children would have died before they were born. And I would have never have seen their little faces.” He sniffled. “You are as much responsible for the survival of this family as Zidane is.”

“I only fought at Cleyra, and I lost.” Fratley spoke up.

“Cleyra’s people are our people.” Wei answered. “You both saved us, you both tried to save *all* of us.”

The husband and wife stood beside each other across the table.

“Thank you, Dragon Knights, for saving us, and for all you have done for who we love and cherish.” They said in unison, and both bowed.

Freya and Fratley were calmly speechless.

“We have come to understand a part of your story, and we are so grateful you are together. We wish to express our gratitude to you and celebrate your having each other with these housewarming gifts.

Freya and Fratley stood up.

“We insist.” Kal stated.

Wei presented a small box. “For you, sir Fratley. Come with me, for now it’s a secret.”

Kal lifted his. “For you, Lady Freya. And the same applies.”

Fratley followed Wei where she led him, into a small adjoining room. Freya followed Kal to the darkest corner of the room.

Freya took the tiny box gingerly in her forepaws and opened it. Inside lay a pink ribbon of the most delicate silk she’d ever touched, and it was all too familiar to her.

“A wedding ribbon for my tail.” She blushed and gave into a total grin.

“For when that day inevitably comes.” Kal smiled. “And I am sure you will agree it is a welcome replacement for the grief ribbon you used to wear.”

Fratley opened his small box and withdrew a resplendent ruby red glass vial.

“What is it?” He asked.

“It’s an aphrodisiac potion, with magical essence.” Wei blushed, and so did he.

“How do I...”

“It’s not for you, give it to Freya.”

“I thought this gift was for me!” Fratley laughed.

Wei giggled and put her hands to her face, and turned to make sure no one was listening.

“It is a gift for you, just trust me.” She cast a powerful glance at him. “Have her drink it, it tastes wonderful, it only takes a few minutes for it to work.”

“How well does it work?” He asked, intrigued.

“It’s *very* powerful.” She bit her lip. “I love it. Kal gives it to me whenever he knows he won’t be going anywhere the next day.”

“I look forward to seeing how close it brings Freya and I together.”

“It will bring you *very close*. But Fratley...”

“Yes?”

“You must see that she only ever uses it inside your home. *Never ever* out of doors.” She

whispered, her eyes flashing.

“Why?”

“Because it is Stardust, and it has a way of returning from whence it came, and your beautiful Freya already shimmers like a new Star.”

His sprained arm in a crude wrapping and wooden splint, Cid set himself upon the wrecked stone wall that opened a gaping hole into a building at the edge of the district. He had bargained for a small wagon and loaded it with mortar, a trowel, chisels, a hammer, new stone, and whitewash if he got that far.

One by one, the stones sat in place. As the wall grew higher, so did his spirit and he found innovative ways of lifting himself to the next course.

When surprised Burmecians found him working all alone and expressed their surprise, he laughed.

When a woman identified him and all the others reacted in horror and concern, he laughed harder.

“This is not the first time I’ve played the role of city builder, or re-builder for that matter!”

9. Stardust

— STARDUST —

Freya hung on Fratley as a dewdrop on a fern, and he clung to her like a bud to its confined blossom.

Their little burrow was warm with the heat of a fire, and each other. Everywhere they went they were attached. Freya found every waking moment one to make up for lost time. They had mastered the art of walking while hugged together facing each other. He always faced forward and she always lost herself in him, and cared not where he led her.

The lives of the laughing white rats had become eating, bathing, making love and sleeping.

A heavy bar lay across the door. Within the tiny stone Haven there was no Horizon to be seen. Their world was now small and close, tangible, familiar, welcoming, nurturing. The borders were its walls and ceiling, no force could withdraw he from her or her from him, no foreign presence could enter, no unkind wind could pierce the walls. Her home was built far too strongly for that.

Undisturbed, free of pain or terror or unrest, their natural instincts to nest had now overrode all others. Their laughter began almost without cause, it trailed from them and floated through the tiny house and made the air taste like rainbow, and Freya's had become so pure and joyful it was infectious to him and he felt the overwhelming need to be in absolute physical contact with her whenever it began to overtake her. He drank in those sounds and feelings through his skin and ears and entire self like nectar and could never drink enough.

Wrapping around each other felt as natural and innate as breathing. They quickly grew to detest being separated in any way. When they did, they both felt a physical pull toward each other as if connected by taut silk ribbon. In each other's arms and legs, they lost track of date and time.

They played and splashed in the hot soapy water of the tub, sending water and suds all over the floor and filling the air with weightless iridescent bubbles.

His loving touch made her sleepy.

He lovingly washed her feet with fragrant soap and soft lotions, he worked it between her toes, her callouses had since vanished because of these many

sessions. To her it felt good, but to both of them it felt symbolic.

“You have walked this empty world wide.” He whispered to her. She inhaled reflexively from the sensation in her ear.

“It makes me want to carry you everywhere.”

She grabbed at him.

“It makes me want to fill your life with ease, and freedom from weight and care, for that is what love is, is it not?”

His love had changed, and grown. Freya had harbored so many fantasies of their life together after finding him and they had grown in intensity and completeness each year he had been missing, but here and now they were now all outdone. This was not the Fratley she knew, this was far more than anything she had ever dared imagine.

She kissed him and moved to get up from the bath. He wrapped his arms around her from behind and made to follow her. She giggled and turned around. “No Fratley, wait a moment.”

He gave her a pathetic look.

“I have a surprise for you.” She gently pushed him back down into the water. He hesitated, and tried grabbing her again. Her laughter filled the tiny room, and became more intense when she slipped on the wet floor and fell into his embrace.

“I’ll be right back, I promise.”

She did return, very quickly. Fratley eagerly hung on the side of the bathtub as she came back through the door and shut it, visibly embarrassed and shifting one foot and shivering from her sudden departure from the hot bath.

“What is it?” He asked.

A swish of her hidden tail revealed shimmering pink silk tied delicately to its end.

His eyes widened.

She blushed and turned her head away and down toward the floor.

“Freya, come.”

She did so; he caught her and pulled her back into the welcoming hot bath.

“It’s a wedding ribbon...” He said, as if this was his first time actually seeing one.

“I wanted to wear one for you for so long...”

“It’s so beautiful on you...” he went progressively redder in the face and fondled the silken ribbon in his fingers as if holding the most delicate and treasured thing in the world.

“It was Kal’s gift to me.”

“Does this mean...”

“Yes.”

“I *love* you.”

“I love you *too*.”

She pressed to him and kissed him.

“I have to give you my gift, too.” He said when they broke the kiss.

Freya laughed. “Wei’s gift was for you, not me.”

Fratley went red again. “Yes, it is. She says it is a gift that I must give you, for me to enjoy.”

Freya’s eyes flashed.

“I don’t have to get up, I’ve been keeping it here.” He pulled the small red vial from the very back of the little soap crevasse chiseled into the

stonework on the wall. Freya took it in her forepaws and gazed at it. It was truest red in hue and it sparkled, refracting the dim light of the candles in pleasing rays of ruby.

“Is this for my hair?”

Fratley’s jaw tightened and his eyes shifted.

Freya stared at him.

“Is this a *love potion*?” She asked, joyfully feigning indignance.

“...In a manner of speaking...” Fratley hesitated.

Freya could not hide her overpowering smile. “But I *already* love you, Sir Fratley.”

“Wei told me it is very powerful.”

“Oh?”

“She said it would make you feel *very* good.”

Freya’s eyes flashed even more intensely and grew starry in the candlelight. Her blush intensified.

“H — how....”

Fratley drew her closer.

“How do I...”

“Wei says you drink it. She says it tastes good. She says...”

Freya instantly yanked the cork from the vial and drank half of its contents. A drop of the ruby red liquid fell from her lips and landed in the suds surrounding them.

He looked at her, mortified. Wei had not told him how much of it should be taken at a time. He had no idea what to expect now.

“It tastes like how roses smell...”

He took the vial delicately from her and replaced the cork. “I love seeing you enjoy everything you touch.”

She felt a deep penetrating warmth softly making its presence known in her core. It felt as if her insides were turning to warm gold. She blushed intensely and closed her eyes.

“Ooohh...”

She felt lighter in the water, she kissed him and reclined into him. He tasted the remnants of the sweet potion in her mouth, but he did not feel her body rest against him. She hung, as it seemed, suspended. Where the droplet of the potion had

landed in the bath, the suds and bubbles had begun to foam and grow in size.

Fratley felt her leaving him. “Wh — Wha —”

Freya let out a sigh of deep contentment and her eyes drew closed. She rose in the water.

“Freya, you’re...”

“Fratley, I — I feel so wonderful...”

With a quiet and gentle rush of water, Freya’s body slipped out of his forepaws, broke the surface of the water and did not return. She weightlessly drifted into the air above the bathtub, followed by an entourage of rainbow-surfaced bubbles rising from the tub that turned the color of the air itself iridescent.

She was floating away.

For a moment, he was too shocked to respond. He watched as his lover drifted away from him through the air, awkwardly, gracefully, helplessly, toward the ceiling. She wore an expression of sublime, joyful surprise and happiness he had never seen before. Free from weight and care, just as he had always wished for.

It aroused him. He needed her desperately.

“Freya, come back!”

She continued to float away. It became apparent to him she had no control in the matter.

Her face was filled by a giddy smile whose force caused her to squint, and she was almost entirely red in a hard blush.

“You’ll have to *catch* me...” She playfully, breathily teased him, the sound of her voice betraying her intense need.

He was already raising himself from the tub to catch her as she pushed off him with one foot. Up she went, swimming in the air, much too far away from him until she was jerkily arrested by her tail firmly in his grasp. She bounced in the air and yelped with joy and sudden intense arousal, her arms and legs gyrating.

“Hold me!”

“Freya, *come here!*”

Feeling weightless and free of any tangible surface or tether except for her tail made her want confinement and safety. She reached for anything to grab onto but found nothing but equally buoyant bubbles that slipped through her grasp, she tried to

wrap her arms and forepaws around herself but found they betrayed her, the effect of the potion had made her ethereal and love drunk and devoid of most of her strength, as if she were only half-there.

It was as if she was intoxicated but without any of the painful or unpleasant side effects usually brought on by the heavy liquors she was used to. She felt softer, she felt a heightened sensitivity, she felt vulnerable. Most of all she felt intense and whole desire for her lover and to be held by him. She needed pressure and something to push against and something to confine her and could not obtain one, she began to whimper and thrust herself at the air.

Fratley was overcome by intense emotions as he retrieved her. She squirmed and writhed as the feeling of him reeling her in by her tail sent waves of heat and tension throughout her now undeniably buoyant body.

She had always loved it when he pulled on her tail, but this was something entirely new and magical.

He gathered the helpless soft white package that was his soulmate securely into his arms and back down into the tub with a loud splash. Suds and

bubbles went everywhere. She softly clung to him and he desperately clung to her. He felt her upward pull trying to return her to the air, to the sky, away from him. They instinctively pressed together and he rolled on top of her.

“Fratley hold onto me!”

“Freya, don’t go...”

“I need you...”

“I need you *too*! You can’t leave me, *don’t go!*”

“*Don’t let me go!*”

“*I’ll never let you go!*”

They warred with kisses as he wrapped around her tighter and tighter and worked his way into her. She squealed with pleasure as he did and bucked into him. He was heavy on top of her and she was buoyant underneath him, he pressed down into her and she pressed up into him. Every motion, every push drove them into each other. He struggled to keep her sandwiched between himself and the smooth bottom of the tub. She thrashed and gasped and screamed as he desperately made love to her.

“Fratley!”

Her head trapped under his chin, he sought one of her ears and sucked it into his mouth.

“AH!”

Her body was racked by seizures of pleasure. She had been waiting for him to do this since his memory had been regained. She had been in want of this feeling for so many years, it was more intense than she remembered. Her ears were one of the places she was most sensitive, it felt like he was pulling on her soul.

The entire bathtub and the air around it had become a gently frothing mass of bubbles. None of them seemed vulnerable to bursting and as such had begun to fill every empty space available and in turn began to press Freya and Fratley into each other. They made a soft, slick cushion between she and the hard surface of the tub.

He had snatched up her arms and legs in his bid to contain her. His grasp grew tighter and tighter as he wrapped his entire self around her body, she did all she could to move against him. Every part of him pressed against every part of her, he hilted her and softly jackhammered her, never letting go of her ear. She felt pressure building within her, they were both so near to sweet orgasm.

His hard shaky breathing and needy uncontrollable thrusts made apparent his painful desire for her. She kissed into his neck, for he had lovingly restrained and contained her in every other way. Her beautiful hair had grown weightless and filled his face with lunar white strands.

The pressure within her suddenly increased. She squealed into his neck. He broke contact with her ear and kissed her hard. Their enwrapped tails coiled around them both. She came.

She cried into his kiss and the cries could not escape. He came, and squeezed her buoyant self further into him. Even her tears now floated away and he sought each weightless droplet with his tongue before it could escape.

He lay on her in the hot water and soft bubbles and suds and refused to stop kissing her. The sensation of being connected to him at both ends and pressed against frictionless softness underneath her as her body tried to and could not fly away overwhelmed her and she came again.

He settled on top of her and lay on her as they both calmed. Their heavy breathing slowly began to taper away.

As the pink and violet waterfall of pleasure within him dissipated, he became aware of her crying.

She was unable to form words, but he felt her feelings. He held her only tighter in response. The two enrapt lovers lay in the hot water.

She struggled needily against him. He felt her tears running upward underneath his chin where her head was tucked. He didn't want to let even these float off, all of her was sacred to him.

He sucked her other ear into his mouth, and she shook in his grasp and purred.

He spent an eternity lying on her and love-grooming her with his kisses and tongue, refusing to let her out of his tight grasp. Only after the water began to grow uncomfortably cool, he cautiously arose with her.

The multitudes of large bubbles drifting about in the air obscured and distorted his view of the little washroom, but what he could see was that their splashing had flooded the floor. She had buried her head under his chin and saw nothing until his first steps from the tub became slippery, and her tears turned to those of laughter.

He felt the laughter drag upward on her, her upward push became more intense and his grip reflexively tightened. He changed his hug and finally let her arms free, she grabbed at a large bubble floating behind him and pressed it against his back, its slippery softness sent shivers up his spine.

The bathwater, their soap, the magic in the potion or a combination of the three had made her as slippery as the orb she had just caught. It was lovely, and surreal, and exotic. He felt it with every move he made, and refused to un-encase her for fear of losing her.

He determined the floor was far too slippery to navigate standing up, so he knelt with her in the inches of soapy hot floodwater on the floor and shuffled them both to the door on his knees as he held her. Even this brought them intense pleasure as their bodies rubbed together.

They both sought somewhere close and confined and secret. The beautiful enchanted substance that Wei gifted them had filled Freya with Sky and broken her attachment to the world. He needed to find a smaller world to retreat with her into as quickly as possible, one only as big as the two of them.

In no time he had slid them to their bed, and up onto it. She had not let go of the bubble she had caught and clung to it and to him as he dragged her into the sacred and secret and close caverns under their blankets. More of them had followed into the bedroom from the open washroom door and made the room look like a resplendent soft colorful fantasy, surreal and dreamlike.

As he pushed her into the deep, soft darkness, she grabbed toward more of the rainbow orbs in the room past the opening behind him, gasping. They were beautiful, they were soft, they reminded him of her now, he wanted them too, they both wished to add more weightless softness to their intensely needed secret burrow paradise. He was overwhelmed with the desire to catch and hold anything free of gravity. He reached back and stuffed the bubble behind him around her into the bedding cave causing her to react joyfully, and turned around with her.

She yelped with delight and they both struggled to hold each other and capture and entrap more of them. When one would slip away, her efforts would redouble desperately.

Each one she caught they used their whole bodies to bring inside. Those they stashed tried to push she and Fratley softly out of their little cave. They giggled uncontrollably in hot blush.

After fighting with a particularly plump one that slipperily fought their attempts to save it, Freya came loose from his grasp and floated up into the soft vestibule of the blanket doorway, crying out for him and grabbing at the escaping bubble. He leapt with all his might and caught them both by heaving the edge of the blankets up and over them, closing that doorway tightly. He pinned her between the nearly lost orb and him, and shuffled them deep into the blankets where the others were, and they thrashed to tighten the cave around them.

The heavy blanketing cooperated; the space became smaller, the rescued bubbles pressed inward at them from all sides with no room for anyone to escape and be lost, she was as slippery and as light and warm as they were and the two lovers found themselves both suddenly in Heaven.

Here was the tight confined safe place they needed. Here was all that their instincts told them was required for them to exist together.

She closed her eyes and began to laugh, he rolled her over and over against the smooth softness of the iridescent orbs and pinned her against the walls and floor of their tiny protective pocket universe.

She grabbed weakly at him and he wrapped her up in himself again and suddenly they were making love again. This time they were pushed together by all that was around them. Fratley sunk his head beside hers and buried his face in the bubbles behind her, and she kissed those behind him. They glowed luminescence in the pitch dark of their cavern, Freya and Fratley saw each other by ethereal dim blue and turquoise and violet and pink light.

As he drove her down into the soft orbs they sprung her back against him as did her own lighter than air body.

Feeling so helpless made her feel exotic and special, and being so confined by him made her feel desired and Safe. She had not felt truly safe in so long, the last time was a distant and shimmering memory. She lost herself in the feeling as if it was another layer of blanketing she could wrap herself up in.

The wedding ribbon on her tail made them want each other. Her body being free of gravity made

them want each other. Her sweet smelling hair floating in his face and around his neck made them want each other. The softness of the crammed luminescent orbs in their tiny burrow unable to escape made them want each other. They frolicked in the dim glow, their squeaks bounced off the soapy orbs and echoed within them. They both felt sheltered and protected in the tiny space. They crammed the bubble they had almost lost between each other and drowned in its softness.

Neither of them had ever felt so sensual before, and neither had ever had their sensuality satisfied so completely before. He had never heard such happy sounds from her. They had never made love so intensely and wholly as this. They had never been so far free from discomfort and pain and sorrow and misery before. They had never desired each other this powerfully before. Their tails acted as extra limbs to hold each other together. He squeezed her underneath him and they made passionate lovesex as if they were going to lose each other.

All he could feel was her. He plugged her pleasure squeals with a kiss and she erupted.

She came again, and again, and again.

Her love screams drove him on and on and on long after he was spent.

Tired out, he finally followed suit, and fell still on top of her, panting, spent, warm, utterly satisfied.

Afterglow felt as a warm and violet-sweet tide.

They breathed deeply and became one with each other's familiar scents and rhythms. Fratley began to settle into dreams until he felt Freya begin to cry again.

He tiredly pulled his head back to gaze at her. Her blue eyes had never before appeared so deep and glassy. Her pupils were dilated and through them he saw stars.

"I n-need you..." she whispered. Her tears ran upwards, left her face and floated against his.

"I can't be apart from you, never ever." He whispered, and kissed her.

He lay his head back down beside hers.

"I feel so safe." She whispered. "You make me feel safe."

"I was meant to sleep on you. I love you as I have loved no one else, my dearest treasure." He trailed

off, and again pulled her ear into his mouth.

He felt her smile with her whole body, through his.

He fell asleep like that, and she quickly followed.

He awoke to her licking and nuzzling and kissing his ear and the side of his head with gentleness he did not know she was capable of, and had never known himself from anybody. He responded by shifting on top of her in a way he knew felt good to her, and stroking her hair. She sighed.

None of morning's light came into their secret bedding cave. They saw each other by the gentle and kind luminescence of the captured soft orbs that still crammed them together.

They felt as if they had slept a hundred years, and they were still pleasantly tired.

"Good morning." He whispered to her.

"Is it morning?" She whispered back.

He rubbed against her, growing re-accustomed to being awake.

She shifted under him, comfortably.

He got up on all fours, to stretch.

She bobbed buoyantly up off the blankets underneath him, and floated against him.

“Catch me!” She gasped.

Neither of them had remembered.

She delicately bounced off of him and would have kept going if he didn’t abruptly re-arrest her in a tight hug.

Their arousal and the instinctive need to cling and protect and be protected was sudden and he had her pinned against slippery softness in an instant. They pressed and thrust together.

“You stay, sweet bubble.” He panted.

“Hold me, safe burrow!” She demanded.

Again he sucked in one of her ears, and She mouthed on his neck as he rammed her. They both made sounds they could not control.

They both came quickly and simultaneously, which somehow magnified the feeling of release ten fold for both of them. Their kiss was unbreakable as he rolled forward and fell on top of her.

Now it was his turn to cry.

She nuzzled against him, she was sure she knew what troubled him.

“N — no matter how tightly I hold you....” His speech was slurred by afterglow.

She held onto him with all her strength.

“No matter how tightly I hold you, our time together will be *finite!*”

Her eyes widened and filled with buoyant tears.

“I want to live with you forever. I do not want our time together to ever end.” He wept. “I want to live with you in the place I saw, where my memory came back to me from!”

“Hey, did you know that Time flows, just like water?” -Black Mage No. 87

Bannister, Webb and Moran quietly discussed inconsequential matters regarding their airship in the vestibule of the old Fire’s Throne tavern.

Out came stumbling their intrepid captain with a violent banging of the door.

Surprised, they greeted him with a nod, and Webb tipped his cap as he was the only one wearing one.

Wide-eyed and purple-faced, Bancroft greeted them in return with a raised hand and a sudden and powerful stream of vomit all over the stone steps. His body shook with the force of the expulsion.

The three crewmen watched with horror and interest.

When he had quite finished, his legs collapsed and he fell upon the stone, twitching and unconscious.

The three men looked at each other, and quickly took their leave in different directions, each resolving to not remember being there to anyone who asked.

10. O, Frabjous Day!

— O, FRABJOUS DAY! —

“I don’t want her to leave! Dad won’t let me out of Burmecia, I can’t follow her!” William fumed.

“Then you must tell her that you want her to stay.” Puck replied.

“I can’t. I know she wants to go home more than anything, and I’m way too young!”

“Then at least tell her how you feel.”

William went red.

“I can’t.”

“Of course you can.”

“*You’re the King! Promise* me you’ll tell her.”

Puck hung his hands exasperated, but he understood William’s pain far too well.

“I will.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“And tell her to please come back soon!”

Voltaire had come in from the rainy gray and landed within Burmecian walls the day prior. With her from Alexandria came as many travellers and supplies as her small hold spaces could carry, but most of the former and all of the latter were quickly hastened aboard El Adrel, bound for Cleyra.

Among those that boarded El Adrel were Cleyran survivors that had convened in Burmecia from across the world, a few native Burmecians who had lost their homes or mates or families to the war, Claire, Nina, Sharon and Shannon, tired Kildea, Wylan, Kurn and Nella, Puck, and the Ninth Regent, and any object of Burmecian origin deemed useful to assist any possible need at the great tree, if it truly did exist again.

With these, and the coal delivered upon the last visitation, the War ship and the White ship lifted from the ground without incident and both pointed their bowsprit and ram South and West at the Vube desert.

El Adrel and Voltaire coasted effortlessly on the updrafts from the amber sand far below. The rising sun made their metals shine and covered their decks with warm rays, as did the laughter of the playing children.

Banter ran up and down from bridge to engine room and from bridge to bridge by the light of telegraph lamp as the airships and their captains raced to match speeds.

Cid let out a hearty laugh, looking from afar at his own battlecruiser. Bancroft leaned forward against the steering engine telemotor as if this would somehow add speed to his airship.

“Forward my beauty, *ffforward!*” He hissed, a fierce and sobered look in his eyes, intent on the unseen prize over the horizon. The Regent pondered, could it be he had forgotten his gin in the joy of his airship finally come into her own again, or had he simply run out?

The stokers below were laughing up the voice tubes at the blessing of good dry coal, and wisps of steam escaped from the safety valve pipes behind

the funnels indicating all was as it should be with the men and machinery below stairs.

Cid knew Voltaire's captain to be a good sport, and that they were in fact barely working her engines. What appeared to be close race was in fact a trivial cloud stroll for the silver-rammed warship. He knew should she fully extend herself, she was capable of three times their current speed.

He closed his eyes and listened to the engines' steady beat.

The captain of Voltaire shortly ruined it by hanging on the steam valve for his whistle. Bancroft finished the job by responding overzealously with his. The bridge windows shook with the noise.

The voices of the two airships harmonized with each other and both ships took their turn serenading the other. The bronze whistles had come from the same foundry and machine shop in Lindblum and were tuned very well to each other, differing in note but sharing the same fifths and key. Mothers covered their children's ears. None of the long-tailed passengers had ever heard such a noise before or in such a context and as the throaty metallic

vocalizations faded in their long ears, it was overcome by waves of laughter and cheering from the decks.

Puck pretended to fly with the ship, his arms spread wide as he ran across the deck, laughing.

The joy of the others around him been the catalyst for him to awaken from his thoughts, the wind exhilarated him, the warm air and rising sun filled him with life, the sensation of flight unencumbered him from his turmoil if only for a moment. For the first time since leaving for Cleyra the first time, he felt Young.

He stopped cold and his vision turned rosy when he caught sight of Nina, her head tilted back as she leaned on the railing with the others, long golden hair billowing softly in the wind.

She was to him a picture framed by all those others and the airship itself brimming with happy anticipation, hope and the wonder of flight and travel to somewhere they dared dream of as better. In that moment, he made a decision that landed in the well of his soul.

He must always be surrounded by these feelings, and see the world like this. These feelings must be

those that live in his people. And he must win the heart of this beautiful one.

“Sandstorm starboard!”

“That would be Cleyra. Starboard rudder twenty degrees!”

El Adrel pointed herself at the distant, towering, swirling funnel.

Voltaire bid a quick farewell salute of her whistle and the crack and bang of a green flare fired from the signal bridge. With a change in the sound of her engines, her airscrews became a blur and the battlecruiser *shot* forward, splitting the air with spiraling vapor trails from the tips of her whirling, whistling blades.

Bancroft watched in dismay and shame as she demonstrated her true capabilities, becoming small and disappearing toward the horizon.

“Bad form, bloody showoff!” He bellowed, reaching for the telegraph nearest him but becoming more incensed when he found its lever and its pointer both already resting on “Ahead full”.

“I’m scared.” Said Sharon.

“So am I.” replied Shannon.

“You are?”

“Of course.”

“Why?”

“The same reason you are. I’ve been wanting to go home forever, but now that we are, I’m terrified it will just hurt us more.”

Sharon sniffed. “I don’t know if I can bear to see it. It could never be the same without Eileen.”

Shannon embraced her. The feeling of comfort was met with the pain of the memory of a similar embrace just before their home had been torn off the world by fire and had sent them whirling through the air.

The sandstorm churned and darkened the sky over the bow.

“All stop!”

The telegraphs rang in reply and El Adrel coasted on warm air, but as drew near the towering funnel of the sandstorm, it lessened, tapering down from the top. Emerald Green resplendence began to crest its amber and beige waves.

The frothing mass of white bodies suddenly shifted forward on the deck to the bow and packed to the railings. The crewmen on the bridge could make out a hundred craning necks and raised ears.

“Retain steerageway, ahead slow!”

Ringling above, ringling below, the hull shifted with the engines.

The bow pierced the spiraling wind around the tree and pushed the airship upwards. The pitching of the hull seemed to go unnoticed by the throngs crowding the deck. Through the vortex of hot air the sturdy airship pushed until suddenly under her was a wide circular floor of shimmering green leaves.

Now the silence turned to Joy, even over the noise of the wind behind her and her airscrews and machinery. The sound seemed to lighten the ship, and noticeably.

“Maintain level!” Came the call. “Shed lift!”

The iron hull still gently rose as she circled overtop the great shimmering tree and only began to settle once the engine power had been cut in half. Bancroft and his crew exchanged raised eyebrows, and then looked back out over their deck.

Through these past years of wartime relief and the trickle of refugees from every corner of the world, the Captain and his crew had become used to only the miserable covering the deck. Shadows and echoes of people, bent and downtrodden, until even a single playing child became foreign. It had been why the Captain had turned to drinking such inordinate amounts. It was responsible for quite a lot of slack jawed bad habits aboard ship.

This was entirely new.

None of them had ever seen happy Burmecians or Cleyrans before, let alone joyful ones. He could not in fact remember the last time he had seen any large group of any kind of people or creatures in a state of happiness. The whole deck below them became awash in different shades of wagging tails.

All present found it utterly infectious, Cid's mustache increased its inclination by several degrees, his eyes sparkled and he seemed to stand slowly taller on his toes.

Bancroft turned a shade of red.

Are You alright? Cid asked.

Red turned to purple.

“Were you just... smiling?”

Bancroft hurled his boot at him.

Kurn appeared at the door.

“Captain, they are demanding to speak with you!”

“Good heavens, what have I done wrong this time...”

Nella squeezed into the doorway beside Kurn, her face full of such sunrays it turned the bridge to gold.

“I never thought it possible, please, my people wish to celebrate...”

Before Bancroft could say anything, Cid interjected.

“We shall burn the furniture!”

Bancroft violently stamped on the Regent’s foot. His mustache increased in inclination even further in response.

Any crewmember not glued to his station began to run out of the bridge, and down to the decks. Bancroft followed suit, screaming fiercely an endless list of items which were not to be burned, broken, overturned, moved, looked at, or otherwise disturbed, under penalty of instant death by his own hands.

Nella ran down the narrow stairway after him, trailing laughter that buoyantly lingered in the corridor. She paused before the corner at the bottom and looked back. "Come my dearest!"

Kurn and Cid stared after her.

"Quite a woman." Cid stated.

"A drop of rainbow who has become earthbound." Kurn corrected him, and followed her.

"This will be the new Festival for Lindblum you know." Cid called down. Kurn stopped where his wife had just been.

"What?"

"Yes, Reconstruction day, in which we celebrate the rediscovery and reconstruction of Cleyra and the helping hand of captain Ellenroad Bancroft and his intrepid vessel El Adrel, where furniture in vast

quantities is burnt in the boilers of our great metropolitan powerhouses. Among other things, I can think of no better way to annoy my colleague.”

“No one is going to give up their furniture every year for that mess.”

“That’s why we will build it specifically for the festival.”

“Regent, that is completely idiotic.”

“Far less so than the senseless torment and killing of living things.” Cid raised his eyebrows, his mustache finally readjusting to its original position. “As your drop of rainbow would say.”

Kurn was silent.

The airship alighted gently upon the tree, cradled by a trillion green leaves and a hundred thousand softly bending boughs. She did not tilt or scrape her bottom.

“All stop, boiler room cease stoking and prepare to stop feedwater!”

Before her airscrews had ceased to turn, a frothing tide of white noses, ears and tails overflowed the deck, pouring down ropes and rope ladders, out of portholes and windows and gangway doors, sliding down the sides of the tumblehome hull and bouncing down into their waiting tree. The white tide ran in every direction as it met the green, as each individual began to explore what they had thought lost forever and ever.

Each rat formed a roaming white dot. Groups and pairs and small families, some diving under the green and re-appearing sporadically somewhere else.

Cid watched as he inched his way down the ram bow by a rope on a pair of skids he had fastened to his boots. Reaching the end of the slope where the plating became a vertical drop, he dangled at the end of the rope until he was caught by white forepaws.

“Welcome to Cleyra, Regent!”

“I never thought I would see my home again, it looks so new...”

Cid surveyed as the rats who had caught him lowered him against the floor of leaves. He was extremely unsteady as he felt his feet meet yielding branches with gaps between them.

All around, the tree formed meadows with its canopy. Violet and blue blossoms dotted the green by the millions, and the color shifted as each gentle puff of wind disturbed the surface. Hills and gullies were actually large branches and offshoots pushing up through the leaves. The beige waves of the distant sandstorm licked over the green horizon made by the tree.

“So... this is your home...” He pondered. “I’ve never been here before, how similar is it to what it once was?”

“There used to be our settlement, but the tree feels *just the same*. Cleyra was always the tree, our settlement was just built upon it.”

“But it’s *grown* now!”

“So much bigger...”

“It will take us so long to rebuild here.”

“I want to help you.” Cid replied. “In any way I can.”

He turned to look as four joyful figures flashed by.

“You can’t catch me!”

“I always have!”

Long golden hair and laughter trailed behind quick bodies glistening in the sunlight.

One caught another in a flurry of squeaks, another went to lean against and examine a large branch towering up above the leafy plain, and the fourth joined her. He saw Puck moving after them, as if magnetized.

“I love this place.” Cid said, more to himself than anyone around him.

“We love it, too.”

“What’s wrong?”

Cid was abruptly on his knees.

For a moment, the Regent saw the tree burning around him. Laughter was replaced with screaming and pain. Dwellings he had never seen but could only imagine the form of and those in them turning to ash, and in the red sky above a pronounced absence of any of the rams, airscrews or cannonade of the Fine and Fair Fighting Fleet he had flaunted like rings on his fingers.

“Regent?”

“I — I’m sorry...”

Nina had followed Claire when she dove below the leaves and found herself in a little shaded cavern arched over by branches just under their surface, one of hundreds in a labyrinth of dim, moist, sunbeamed corridors.

Approaching her sister, she saw her expression had turned from frolic to fret.

“What’s wrong?”

“I want Eileen to be here!”

“I...”

Claire turned her head away.

“I do too.” Nina whispered.

“Do you think she’s out there somewhere, still trying to come home?”

Nina sniffled. Many answers stuck in her throat at once. She lay down in the hollow beside her sister.

“We will get through this, together, the way we always have. The four of us together.”

“But it was always *five!*”

Nina winced.

“All we ever knew how to do was dance and listen to the Oracle’s stories and the high priest’s wisdom, but I had no idea the world was such a big place. How can we ever make anything we had before again?”

“With ease, now that our home tree lives again.”

“Shannon always made everything look so easy. I don’t know how she survived out there so easily, all alone.”

“It was never easy for her, Claire...”

“Is he still following us?” Shannon asked.

“The brown kid?” Sharon looked back over her shoulder.

“Yes, he’s strange!”

“I think that’s Puck!”

“What, King Puck?!”

The small brown head behind them vanished underneath the leaves.

Puck's footing lost the branch and he tumbled down through yielding branches and dew-wet green, and into springy white softness.

The softness reacted with a squeak. So did he.

He turned from brown to bright red when his face met Nina's. He felt her breath against his.

"Puck!"

"You're so beautiful..." He murmured, his lips seeming to act of their own accord before he could stop them. He was dazed more at his own phantom statement than having fallen on the object of his desire and being face to face with her. She was far more beautiful up close than from peeping out of corners at a distance.

"I'm — what?"

Puck froze. His body had betrayed him by speaking and now did so again by refusing to take flight.

Nina's expression became one of bewilderment. Claire's became one of brightest beaming joy and mirth.

"House engines port and starboard, shafts in to open up!"

The great wooden deck of El Adrel opened downward like gigantic trap door to expose the cargo hold packed almost to deck level with goods.

"Shafts out for the crane!"

Kildea and Wylan had quietly presided over this great burden being loaded into the ship while in Burmecia. They had patiently taken the time to describe what stone their cathedral had been built of, the color and recipe for the Cleyran form of stained glass, shingle material and its preferred age, what was needed to make the sort of twine used to bind their dwelling rooftops and the forms and origins of Cleyran hand tools. The kind of food, spices and ingredients their people preferred, all down to the most minute detail, the shapes and methods of creating silverware and crockery, the clay used in their chimneys and the special fibers of their

windmill sails, and how Cleyran knitting and spinning wheels were built.

To that end, the airship had been piled with all these things that could be built on short notice, and as many supplies and goods as could be found to create them once at the tree. This as well as tarps and temporary shelters, lamps and lamp oil, candles and nonperishables and barrels of brandy and beer and other housewarming gifts from throughout Burmecia and afar. Enough to make a real start of things.

And now the great steam driven arm of the crane forward of the gaping door in the deck lifted these things out and placed them gingerly amongst the leafy green. The ship's crew dispatched each load and lot of tonnage into the air, and the rats received them as they came down. The airships frames and hull groaned as she slowly shed her immense and heavy load. The supplies dispersed around and under the leaves as the unloading continued so as to avoid producing one localized piled mass that would break through the branches and go tumbling down the tree.

The furniture again moved throughout the ship and across the deck, but this time not to the boilers. Any that had not been burnt went down with the

Cleyrans into their tree. Most of them had noticed it was built with a peculiarly familiar Burmecian touch and had demanded it not be burnt despite the overzealous Cid's sense of humor, and had requested to take it with them.

"Stairways, stone, and roofbuck." Kildea reiterated. "These are most essential to establishing an initial settlement. It will make our people able to create and reach shelter.

"Roofbuck?" Giffard asked.

"The proper term for what you call roofing clay tiles."

"How do you make the stairways?" Cid asked with interest.

"They are carved into the trunks and strongest tributary branches of the tree. They are our streets and thoroughfares. Flat places are rare in a tree and we will have to carve those for ourselves much later.

"What do you need?"

"I have preserved these drawings of the traditional Cleyran tools. They are our records, I only was able to save some. These records have been kept since the first settlement was built here

long ago, and record how each feature was made. These tools have their origins in Burmecia, they can still be made there. We were never toolmakers, we had kept the originals under our cathedral in case we needed them again, but they were destroyed...”

“I shall arrange regular supply runs, as I have done with Burmecia.”

“Just not with my ship you won’t. I’m going to have a long, perhaps indefinite, rest when I get back to Home Port and Port Wine.” Bancroft declared.

“I was certain we could count on you, Captain!” Cid laughed in exasperation.

Nella lead Kurn deeper and deeper under the canopy of the tree, to where natural brooks of dew and dripped moisture flowed between ponds and basins. Great knots in the branches became reservoirs and channels for wandering glistening streams. Falling water shot sunbeams in every direction and into dancing rainbows. Birds and small creatures flitted from their sight and eyed them from crags and hollows. The sound of a woodpecker busily making a new home echoed through the cavernous spaces.

“We will make our home here as he is doing now.” Nella whispered, never unlocking her grasp from his.

Kurn said nothing, only following his wife wherever she lead him. This eventually ended at a sheltered hollow that looked for all the world as if it were made for them to re-marry each other in. The growth of branches and moss had grown in a perfect arch over a shadowed alcove covered in a roof of leaves. Flowers blooming in small rays of sun moved and revealed themselves to be butterflies that surrounded her as she drew them inside. She sat down on the floor of moss and pulled him down to her.

“I remember this... it’s *just the same*.”

She felt tears fall.

“*I remember....*”

She felt a deep and primal nesting instinct.

“Of course it’s the same.” She said, looking up at him. “How *Could* they destroy it. How could *anyone* destroy my home. My home is *life itself*.”

Kurn surrounded her with his arms and she sank into him and pushed her head into his long black

beard.

“My deepest fantasy was bringing you to my home and resting in it with you. Until now I thought it impossible. Lie down here with me.”

Kurn did so.

As Bancroft ascended the stairs from hold to deck to promenade to bridge, inspection turned to stroll, to *jaunt*. Joyous rats, jovial humans, and happy other creatures past him in both directions. Conversation of nothing but hope and cheer filled his ears. Laughter rang through the halls and corridors and stairways spontaneously and for no apparent reason, at random intervals. His step up stairs was inexplicably lightened by currents of emotion he could feel running in the air.

Even the horrid miserable little cook was smiling uncharacteristically, and had presented him with a pie he did not in any way want or ask for.

Bancroft Ellenroad had attained a state he detested, he had become *infected* with the happiness of others, in spite of himself, and worse yet he was now indulging in it and unable to stop himself.

Arriving at the bridge and finding it devoid of crew save his first mate, who was busy tallying the weight of unloaded cargo in the ship's ledger, Bancroft arrested him heartily with a re-assuring arm upon his shoulder.

Bannister startled.

“Skip! What can I do for you, isn't all this wonderful?”

“Bannister, do you desire a pie?” Bancroft beamed at him.

“Absolutely, once I've fin —”

The captain happily brought the pie very quickly against his first mate's face with a loud slap and a splattering of crust and freshly baked fragments in all directions.

Bannister's muffled scream of protest blew the pie tin off his face and he staggered back as Bancroft stared intently at him.

He disappeared into the stairwell leading down to the promenade, and Bancroft heard him laughing through the suds as he tripped down the stairs. His last attempt to find or indeed to cause a reference

point of old familiar misery with which to ground himself had failed.

He had banked on the pie being that of fowl and evil qualities to be expected from that tiny heinous cook, but to no avail. The little bastard's contagious happiness must have been baked into it along with everything else and accidentally made a masterpiece tasting of summer sweetness! What a *horrible* thing life was!

But what a wonderful thing life could be.

He found himself laughing uproariously as well as he staggered over to the sunny windows in front of the immense steering manwheel.

He looked over his airship sprawling out before and below him and watched as those who were now enrapt in similar thoughts and feelings spread them everywhere and milled about the deck and its gaping great opening, and watched as through that opening, from the heart of that ship poured the stuff of life and sustenance and peace and healing. Old lives repaired, New lives beginning, a home found again, a kingdom lost being remade.

“*O Frabjous Day, Calous, Calais!*” He chortled in his joy.

11. The Beginning

— THE BEGINNING —

“My dearest one.” Kurn whispered.

“I can’t leave, I can’t, we just got here.” Nella whimpered. “I can’t leave my home again.”

He knew she sensed every protest behind his lips, and spared this sweet creature the insult.

“And I cannot leave you.” He said.

She looked heartbroken. “Then I will have to come with you, because I need you.”

“Not half as much as I need you.”

She began to cry.

“Nella I want no more of this Lindblum nonsense. We will return here, and very quickly.

She drew her head up stared up at him.

“I will respectfully terminate my affairs in Lindblum. Not with it, but in it. I wish to live here with you.

Her gaze of love, warmth, trust and gratitude was interrupted by an afterthought.

“But what of your promise to Lord Puck?” She clutched softly at the hard lump of the twinstone in the pocket of his robe. “And what of dear Cid?”

“My sweet treasure, do you think I would ever forget that? We will hand Cid off to Artania the moment we return. He’s a lucid fellow; he must have surmised this decision of mine would be coming and inevitable since I discovered you. Even had Cleyra not been reborn, I wished to emigrate to Burmecia some day, with you, and live amongst its people — *your* people, to truly understand you. And do not fret for a moment that I might leave that kingdom I have served so long empty handed. Years of service should entitle me to whatever battlecruiser I so choose. Besides, it does not sit right in my bones leaving Cleyra undefended and unattended. A call for help might be answered far too late should I continue to dwell in Lindblum. The distance from here to there is much too far for my liking, especially since you fell into my heart.”

She nestled her head under his chin, in the folds of his long black beard.

“But Nella?”

“Mmm?”

“You must tell me if the idea of an immense iron fighting contraption such as Voltaire living in the branches of your beautiful tree offends you.”

“Not if you let the flowers and ivy grow upon it.”
She kissed him.

From where riveted iron hull plating met green leaves, echoed the end of lovely overture;

“And be well, my dearest Friends.”

The Regent’s outstretched hand and sleeve was met with a hundred white, tugging forepaws. He felt his heart grasped by them just the same, a pull he found it very difficult to resist. Of all the creatures great and small that populated this colorful world, he had always found the rats of the two Kingdoms the most pleasant, amicable and earnest.

“We love you, Cid.” A young male spoke up, mournfully. “Please come back soon.”

“I promise.” He replied, letting the rustling of the leaves under his feet and those crowded around him punctuate the promise.

High above, the Captain's blustering farewell was far more stoic and avoidant of emotional exposition.

Puck, Nina, Claire, Sharon, Shannon, and Kildea all gazed up at him from the green carpet of a towering branch as he stood just above them on the protruding catwalk of the rotor shafthouse.

"I very much doubt I or this airship shall leave the port of Lindblum again for a considerable time, if ever, after this adventure!" He declared more at the air than to them, but then let his gaze and tone fall somewhat. "However...."

They craned their necks.

"However — it has been a true and rare pleasure both for myself and this ship and her crew, to meet and assist all of you, and to come to know your two Kingdoms, which I had previously considered merely an annoyance and an operational distraction to my route...."

A gilt edged red robe flashed in the sunlight in his peripheral vision. He paused as he felt Cid's powerful directional beam of disapproval tunneling into his being from far away. Damn his keen hearing.

"And I very much *wish* to see you all again."

The warm force of their sudden smiles bored into the chainmail of his soul and threatened to either melt his insides or tip him backward into a fall.

“But of course in Lindblum, among my familiar spires and chimneys, the stone towers, marble walls, pulsing clocks and airship docks of my old and familiar Haunts, where the fountains of Gin and Tonic spring eternal and there is always enough *bloody coal* on hand, — and where the bells are mounted securely enough in their towers to be made Regent-proof!” He glared at the red robed dot amongst the white dots down below in the leaves.

Puck wrung his forepaws opportunistically as he finished relating his plans from the anchor of the airship. Nina sat cross-legged on a branch, smiling at him with her head tilted.

“You would never want for anything, *ever again*, if you came back with me. I would make sure of that.” He said, in a tone quieter and more yearning than he ever thought he could generate.

“Lord Puck.” She almost whispered.

“It’s just Puck, dammit!” He stamped up and down, blushing, his rehearsed tone and manner ruined.

She giggled, which instantly silenced him.

“*I must remain with my Home Tree.*”

His shoulders dropped and he became crestfallen. They stared at each other, she leaning slightly forward, smiling and having the upper hand, he bedraggled and at her mercy.

His posture suddenly raised and the spark returned to his gaze, fiercer than before.

“Than I shall stay here with you!” He declared, grinning. “*I love it here anyway!*”

She startled and her expression changed to shock, their roles were instantly reversed. She knew a bluff when she saw one, and this was most assuredly *not*.

His gaze drilled into her. He not only meant what he said, he meant it with honor, and a force she was not accustomed to from anyone so young.

They again gazed at each other in silent impasse, now with him leaning forward and she bolt upright.

“Puck...” She murmured. Her gaze slowly turned from surprise, to admiration.

He melted into his shoes.

After some contemplation, she gently rose to her feet and put her forepaw on his forehead, between the roots of his ears.

He involuntarily began to violently wag his tail. She commanded all the resistance inside her soul to avoid laughter. Buoyant joy filled her voice.

“Puck, Burmecia *needs* its King.”

“It got along just fine without me for a few years.” He said, indignantly through his blush.

“No, Puck, it *didn't*.” She shook her head, and stroked his.

He frowned and could not argue.

She bent down, and kissed his forehead. She was taken aback when he abruptly raised his head, and kissed her back.

“I love you. I shall return for you, M'lady, because I wish to marry you.”

Nina stared at him. Her breath faltered. How was it that a statement so ridiculous did not sound ridiculous at all, from this young one?

“And tell fairest Claire, that William of Burmecia wishes to ask the same of her.” He finished, saluting, turning around, and padding off before she could find a response.

Her whirling thoughts were interrupted by the loud and deep voice of El Adrel’s steam whistle.

“Up ship!”

The telegraphs rang and spun their hands in reply.

Bancroft’s immense hand tightened around the king spoke of the telemotor wheel. He had relieved the helmsman, declaring that if his hand on the controls of the old ship would get them home even seconds faster, then he stand at them for the duration.

Airscrews churned and beat the air as El Adrel pulsated underfoot. One last time, surely, her engines and frame and masts began to bear her weight. A light haze of clean coal pulsed up her chimneys.

“I know you’re tired, I know.” He muttered. “So am I.”

El Adrel shifted on the branches.

“Come on you. Come on.

Despite being lightened of the tonnage of cargo, El Adrel groaned.

“Just once more. Persevere, I know you can.”

The airship lifted from the tree.

“To hearth, and home, and nest and flagon!” He roared.

“Course for Lindblum laid in, steer ninety eight degrees magnetic!” Called out the navigator.

Bancroft did so with glee and rage. He focused the sweep of his eye on an imaginary spot on the horizon and drew a line to it, sighted through the invisible Falcon’s gate, at the doors of the hangar the ship had departed from at the very beginning of this voyage, and where she had originally been destined for when leaving Alexandria now, it seemed, so long ago. The manwheel at the front of the bridge whirled in response. El Adrel’s great iron rudder swung to port.

All who stood in the branches of the tree watched as the immense steam driven flying machine slowly turned toward the south, and laboriously made away, toward the Horizon.

Cheering erupted as they saw from her stern waved a flag of blue with a white cross against it, the original banner from before the people of Burmecia and Cleyra were separated.

The great tree at his back, still towering on the horizon and having grown seemingly no smaller for a time, as it if were slowly shuffling after him, Puck plodded across the sand, solitarily, lost in thought and loneliness.

He felt the weight of Burmecia crushing him. There was absolutely no way he could serve as a King in any capacity, in any way he could think of. There were too many of the simple concerns that had never occurred to him until this most recent series of events, such as food and drink and shelter for his people, to ever think about filling his father's shoes.

How he wished he could apologize to him. He felt the sting of tears again. What schemes he would

not concoct, what pain and what of his own limbs and any material object he would not trade to see his father again, and prostrate himself in front of him, and beg for forgiveness and to be worthy of being called his Son again. To pick dandelions together again in the eaves of the armory as the rain trickled warm and silently down.

Behind him towered a tree of regrets, and before him, over the horizon yet to be seen, were cliffs ringing and howling of profound aloneness and emptiness. Bringing Nina back with him had been his last idea to either distract himself or seek assistance. It was a hapless idea, what would a soft-spoken dancer have to say in matters of court and country. He and the weight of all the affairs now his would bring her only tears.

He became incensed, and beat his fists at the air. That could not be so. He *must* have her, and learn what the point of life was with and from her, and would not bring misery to her with him. If he would not be King, and he *could not* be King, then he knew someone who could.

The delicious spell had not yet worn off. Freya was still free of the pull of gravity, and Fratley still locked her in his arms. They had not left the safe confines of the tiny stone dwelling.

She had grown softer, plumper, healthier, as he had fed her everything she craved and sought after. Gone was the stark and lanky physique and tiring alertness of a life of fighting.

Every itch was met with a scratch; every yearning to be touched was satisfied. Every urge to be together was met with playful wrestling and confinement and orgasms in dark closed spaces. Every time sleep called, the call was obeyed.

He nourished her with love and physical contact and attention as much as food and water. Her softer and more relaxed body was as changed as the new laughter lines and tranquil smile on her face and in her eyes. Her movements and posture had changed from those of a warrior to those of a dancer. Whether this was from her happiness, the weightlessness of her body, or both, he did not know, but gazing on her and holding her, the latter was obviously an accentuation of the former. They were one and the same.

Even her hair had grown healthier and richer in body, and lighter. It seemed to glow in the dark as moonlight.

Due to all this, she was close to being unrecognizable from when he had first caught sight of her during the attacks on Cleyra.

They lay in bed, he inside her, she securely sandwiched underneath him. He would not allow her body to escape from him the way it softly, insistently, constantly was trying to. She squirmed with pleasure and equal desire to stay. He suckled on her soft bosom and moved between her breasts and her face, massaging her there when he moved to kiss her. She bit her lip as the worshipful attention to her large sensitive nipples sent waves of blue and violet pleasure into her.

“I love you.” She sighed.

He rested his complete weight on her and hugged her in response.

“I *need* you.” He whispered, his words muffled by the blankets and her weightless hair.

“Do you know what I always loved most about you?”

Fratley sucked her ear into his mouth in response. The grasp of his tail around her thigh grew tighter.

“I love how you are always *gentle* with me.” She began to softly cry. “I always felt so *safe* with you...”

“I love making you feel safe.” He whispered, and retook her ear.

His hug tightened and he began to softly hump her. She yelped in delight and returned the thrusts. All of him pressed against all of her, her buoyant self could not escape him. They came almost instantly.

“I’m not leaving the house until you won’t float away anymore.”

“Then I hope I stay like this.” She blushed. “I love how this feels, and I love being safe inside with you.”

“We have discovered the last secret, then.”

“Hm?”

“That this is the point and meaning of life, to exist in this way.”

“Fratley...”

“All we went through. All these trials and misfortunes. All was for us to learn this one lesson, and discover this one secret. We may be the only creatures in any land to know it. We are the luckiest two there ever were.”

“Then I may now rest assured that you will not think down on me.” She beamed at him.

“What ever for?”

“For I have decided to relinquish my Knighthood.”

Fratley slowly broke into an uncontrollable grin.

“I feared the same, for I have decided to do just the same. I only love you more for it. How could it be bad to reconsider a decision and life that brought us only misery, and hastened the destruction we lived through?”

Over the next week, a slowly brewing problem became markedly pronounced when Puck made his way back through the outer gate of Burmecia.

Nobody in a position of power seemed to desire it.

William spent more and more time in the palace, in the tiny secret room Puck had used to dwell before ever running away and where he had now remade his home. It was here, on a night of particularly heavy rains, amongst candles and sizzling meat in a small pot that Puck told William his plan.

“I am going to find a replacement King.” He stated, flatly.

William stopped chewing and stared at his friend. “You can’t do that.” He said, flatly.

“I can do whatever I want, I’m King!” Responded Puck with indignance.

“But you won’t be if you do that, and if you aren’t King, you can’t do whatever you want! Besides, who in the whole world would you pick? A King has to be...”

“Sir Fratley.” Puck instantly replied.

“Oh....”

“There, you see?” Puck grinned. “He is the strongest Dragon Knight in Burmecia, he knows more about this Kingdom than I do, my father trusted him, and is the most just and loyal and *good*

and *wonderful* one of us there ever was, and so is his Lady Freya. They were so kind to Jack when....”

Tears flowed.

“Jack?” William asked.

“Fratley *deserves* to be King.” Puck deflected

“But what if he doesn’t want to be?”

Puck opened his mouth and no words came. Of all the directions he had prepared for the argument to turn, he had not thought of this one.

“Of — of course he will want to be. Who wouldn’t want to be the King of Burmecia?”

“Uh.....you wouldn’t.” William looked him sheepishly.

“Silence!”

Fratley strolled with Freya, who had begrudgingly found gravity again for the time being, through the palace grounds, with the royal summons that had drawn him there in his forepaw. Neither of them were entirely pleased to be plucked from their bliss or to see the royal seal again, but they figured

now would be as good a time as any to make good on their mutual promise of renunciation of sword and service.

“Sir Iron-tail Fratley, and the Lady Freya!” Their entrance was met with annunciation.

“Could have done without that.” Freya murmured. His grasp around her tightened in agreement.

The great hall was deep and dim, flickering with the orange firelight of torches and the purple hue of the stained glass. The fragrance of burning incense everywhere relaxed them.

“I am so glad to see you, sir Fratley.” Puck panted as he scampered up.

Fratley could not help but beam down at him.

“I am glad to see you too. I have a very important matter that I —” He glanced at Freya. “That we, would like to discuss with you.”

“So do I.” Puck nodded.

“I gathered by the Royal Summons.” Fratley tilted his head. “You know there was no need for that, you are always welcome in our home.”

“This is very, very important, and I’ve been advised to have witnesses.”

Fratley and Freya noticed many of the rats standing in the dark, shuffle uncomfortably at this remark, peering out from corners and between the columns and abruptly returning to stoicism when the couple glanced back.

“What is it?” Fratley asked, sinking into his boots and feeling Freya do the same.

“You go first.” Puck stated.

They were silent for a few moments. Freya looked up at Fratley, and he down at her. Neither wanted to speak first.

“We have decided —” She broke the silence. “We have decided to...”

“We have decided to renounce our Knighthood and retire our service to this Kingdom, with profound gratitude, effective immediately.”

The fit of rage they both expected never came.

“That’s great!” Puck jumped up and down, happily.

Freya and Fratley, and all the rest of those present stared wide-eyed and shut-mouthed at Puck. One could hear a pin drop in the grand and cavernous space.

“It is?” Fratley shook his head.

“Yes, because that makes it much simpler!”

“Makes *what* much simpler?”

“You taking my place as King!”

Fratley stared again, tilted his head forward, and was overtaken by laughter. Freya buried her snout in the folds of his clothing to try and silence hers, to no avail. All others present remained in stunned and horrified silence.

Fratley’s mirth turned quietly exasperated, and slightly saddened. The thought of it being a joke passed as quickly as it came. He knew it wasn’t.

“Lord Puck.” He eventually was able to bring himself to speak. “I cannot accept this generous offer.”

“It isn’t an offer, it’s a request.”

“Then I must decline your request.”

“Then it is no longer a request, Dammit!” Puck stamped up and down. Finally, the fit of rage they had been expecting. “I am ordering you to take my place as King.”

“I must refuse.”

“You can’t refuse a royal order.”

“You cannot make a royal order if you are no longer King.”

“But I am still the King!”

“Ah, but you won’t be if I followed this order!”

“*I told you!*” William wailed from the knees of the statue of the Protector, jumping furiously up and down. “You wouldn’t listen to me but I told you, he’s got you on this one *just like I did!*”

“*Silence!*” Puck screamed.

Fratley could not keep his eyes open such was the force of his grin, and he held Freya tightly as she erupted her joy into his tunic.

“You *must* do as I say, Burmecia needs a King and I am not it, you are the good and just and kind and decent and brave *Sir Fratley*, my dad *loved* you,

you would be a good King for Burmecia, I just want to do *one thing* right for my Dad.”

Fratley now understood.

“Puck, your father loved you far more than I. Far more than any other, anywhere.”

Puck almost fell to his knees.

“I cannot do as you say, for the purpose of my life is now to serve and care for my Freya. Sometimes we cause the most horrible things with the most pure and good intentions. My service to this Kingdom, and Freya’s, only helped to bring about the awful war that killed your father in the first place, and almost left our people without a Kingdom.”

“And almost destroyed our people entirely.” Freya added.

“You will make the best King that our Burmecia has ever had.” Fratley finished. “You will do so much with this pain.”

“I don’t want to be in pain.” Puck shook his head.

“Abdication of your Kingdom would not lift it from you. It was pain that made me understand what I truly needed, and not to let go of who I loved.” He

instinctively tightened his grasp around Freya, and his ears fell knowing his words were falling on those that were deaf.

Puck pouted, and seethed, and schemed with William under the arch of his favorite shadowed alcove in the palace garden.

“If Fratley won’t take the position of King, I’ll force it on him.”

“That’s terrible.” William shook his head vigorously. “And how would you do that anyway, the whole court heard Fratley refuse.”

“I’ll forge his signature on a document on royal parchment saying he accepts.” Puck’s eyes burned with determination. “I’ll have his signature once I ask him to sign the parchment about renouncing his knighthood that the clerk has made up. If he tries to object, it will be too late because I will have run away to Cleyra to be with Nina, and you’ll come with me to be with Claire.”

William grabbed puck’s face and forced him to lock eyes with him.

“Running away from your problems, forging your friend’s name on something to force him to face them for you? Puck, that’s really the dumbest thing you’ve ever said and I’m not gonna just sit here and let you do this.”

“But I’m the K...”

William’s fierce gaze and the absurdity of his idiotic reply deadened it on his lips.

“What would *Nina think*.”

Puck blushed, angrily.

“She’d never want to marry a coward.”

His blushed vanished and was replaced by a look of utter misery. He recoiled and writhed as if to crawl out of his own skin.

He felt William’s forepaw on his own.

“Puck, you are not alone in this.”

“Yes I am.”

“No you aren’t, because I am going to make a vow to you.”

Puck looked back at him with a grief twisted face.

“I promise to you here and now that I will become a Dragon Knight, like Fratley — *was*. And I will faithfully serve you the way he served your dad. I can think of no better way to serve a King who is such a good friend. *I mean it.*”

Puck started to cry.

“And I’ll marry Claire when I am older, and *you* will marry *Nina*, and this will make our two Kingdoms *one* again.” William could not resist a powerful smile.

Puck placed his other forepaw on top of William’s.

“And I’ll make *you* assistant King.”

From behind the garden wall, they heard the laughter of two very familiar voices.

“Hark, we’ve been spied upon!” William hissed.

Freya and Fratley had overheard everything. As they locked forepaws and tails in the flowerbed behind the wall, they reveled in the unfamiliar and exotic feeling of true hope for the future.

Steiner made his way studiously up the long marble staircase in a blur of images. At once he was at its top and moving across the large checkerboard tile patterns toward the Queen's gallery. At once he was through the door and under the sun of an autumn sky, and at once the violet velvet backed silver cross was being offered to him.

"Sir Adelbert Steiner."

"Yes, your Highness."

"Do you hereforth and hereby accept...."

Steiner, always the man of proper observance of formalities, cut her off. "Forgive me your majesty, but it is customary that I kneel before you."

"You kneel before no one." Garnet declared. "Surely after all of our adventures, and your conduct, I speak to you as an equal."

Steiner was rendered speechless.

Garnet knelt before him, instead.

"Sir Adelbert Steiner, Do you hereforth and hereby accept the position of Supreme Commander of Alexandria, and the position as General over all forces of the Kingdom?"

“I do, my Queen.”

Garnet pressed the silver cross deep into his outstretched palm and held her hand over it for a moment. “I am grateful. Our domain will finally be safe and in good hands for the first time since Brahne’s King died.”

“Surely not.” He responded. “You have been a just and admirable ruler....”

“Steiner.” He stopped.

“I’m not even a queen, the royal family lineage died with the real Garnet.”

He was silent, and she turned away to look over the city from the balcony.

She spoke in a way that betrayed things held inside her for far too long a time finally boiling to the surface. He had never heard true fury in her voice before, and knew it instantly though it was muted. “I was not a proper Queen in blood and more importantly, not in conduct. Had I not tried so hard to help my mother, had I listened to the others instead of poisoning their food and playfully undermining their reason and decision-making like a stupid child, had I not dragged you with me like a

child's doll, *almost everybody who died would instead have lived.*"

Steiner instantly swallowed his reflex to cottle and apologize and quell her anguish. Service was a more nuanced thing, and friendship moreso.

"You are correct about your conduct." He nodded.

Garnet whirled, but not out of anger, at the delight of finally being able to have a conversation with a man finally freed of a rigid and narrow view of things, and it showed in her face.

"So what do you intend to do?" He asked. "Whatever that may be, I am here to assist and —" he paused, thoughtfully. "— council, if I may be so bold, and should the need arise."

"Wisdom fits you well, Adelbert." Garnet beamed at him. "I can think of no better house for it to live in than your soul."

For the first time, Steiner beamed truly and honestly with a pride, and of a different sort that nearly threw him from his feet. All his life he had felt pride as sunlight, showered upon him by others as if from a distant place. This fierce warmth he felt was coming from deep within his own core, solid

and entirely his own and utterly untouchable, unremoveable and irrevocable by any other, and it was a feeling so new as if he had just drawn his first breath of air again. It split his face into a wide toothy grin that he did not even realize he wore.

“In five years.....” Garnet began

“My Queen?” Steiner raised an eyebrow.

“In five years... perhaps sooner — you and I will sit and discuss the true future of this Kingdom.”

“What do you mean?”

“In a time of absence of true bloodline, I have concluded that someone such as a proper Ruler must be chosen by conduct and by their character, not by descendancy. What we have all been through has only proven that to me.”

“Abdication?” Steiner’s grin melted into an expression of horror.

Garnet threw her head back and laughed. “Yes, but fear not, for You will be first King of Alexandria ascended from a Knight in hundreds of years.”

Steiner was again silent. He swallowed another reflex, one to be aghast, and to argue with her.

“I have never known someone with a heart more Alexandrian, and with where you came from, how you have striven, how you have never given up even when you should have, your love for King and Country, its people and all we have ever been — if this Kingdom were one man, it is well and truly You.”

**“It’s Alexandria, we’re finally home!” -
Adelbert Steiner**

Steiner would throw himself at the work he had been appointed with a wild abandon. The fruits of Status meant nothing to him and meant even less now. His first order of business was to civilize the forces under his command. Beatrix had insisted on an army division entirely of women.

He put pen to paper to institute service beyond the sexes, the only criteria of service to be dutiful countenance and the ability to fight. Many archaic traditions began to wither under his hand, although part of Beatrix’s pomp and circumstance, practical armor for women in the service with far less needless exposure would ensure a better ability to

defend ones self was his first order of business for the Alexandrian Army.

His second order of business met with equal parts accolades and criticism. Putting the army in a defensive only role, he seriously reduced the size of the fighting force and gave all those in service, including the army, Civil service directives.

Those who had joined for glory and stature bawked, and some left of their own volition, which Steiner viewed as a pleasant side effect. Others complained that with the eventual dissolution of the Alexandrian Navy into a tiny coast guard force, the Kingdom was turning too inward. Steiner noted that it was these loud voices that benefited most from the spoils of the Kingdom focusing more on its own, and as proof of the soundness of his decisions.

Those who had joined for service exalted the new General, and more began to join for this reason.

He would never let what the late Queen Brahne had done happen again. He saw to it that the state infrastructure that made it possible to reach the destruction she achieved was dismantled and that what remained be friction-braked into the slow doldrums of bureaucracy. For every visible or announced change in directive or arrangement, he

made ten more quietly behind closed doors, all to soften and stratify the power of the monarchy, and to place hidden wheels in the offices of trusted confidants and respected colleagues that would spring into motion at the sign of anyone in the higher echelons of state becoming power-mad. These wheels did not just extend throughout the castle, but all the way to the desks of the regency in Lindblum. This infrastructure of contingency only grew as those in power around the world came to recognize him as a boulder of conscience, a deep well of principle and pillar of virtue, the nature of whom was wholly irrefragable and incorruptible.

It even went so far as to become a well-meant joke in certain halls, with his arrival being heralded as that of the clichéd do-gooder in children's books, but all humor fell flat in the face of his ceaseless toil to genuinely improve and soften the lives of his people.

His third order of business was to focus the hand of state far beyond the capital, to the settlements, towns, villages, hamlets lying near the outer borders. Goods and services, fresh running water, royally funded infirmaries and education, literacy, transit, and readily available assistance in the event of bad fortune or disaster became his directive.

When asked, he understood it simply as a debt to be repaid to the small outlying village where he had been born, and then stripped of everything he'd known by the war.

It became known, by his actions and not by his words, that everything he did, he did for the love of Alexandria, and the whole of it; for Alexandria did not end at the castle gate, or ramparts of the inner or outer walls, or at the edge of the shimmering waterfall of the capital. It was every blade of grass, every stream rounded pebble, every playing child and every freshly painted fence under the sky within its border.

“Princess, Alexandria may only mean the castle to you, but.....” Adelbert Steiner

In every action was foremostly his concern for the as yet unborn Adelbert Steiners so they might not lose their parents to war and strife and misery, and for the as yet unborn Sir Fratleys so that they might not leave the as yet unborn Lady Freyas due to fear of the power and lack of compassion of other kingdoms. Of all the states to hold major power, Lindblum was the only one who had demonstrated to do so reliably and not run amok through the

world, and he trusted it intrinsically to be so as long as there was a Cid at the head of the Regency.

And he visited the great tree, to see the sandstorm Beatrix's echo whirled around its trunk, would marvel at the distant shining violet and indigo glassy spires that would eventually be seen perched atop the just visible emerald green of Cleyra that overtopped its rim.

And he would atone for her mistakes, for that was the greatest gift he could give her. He thanked her each day, foremostly for teaching him these lessons, even moreso than her love for him.

“Silence! — Ribbit” — Cid Fabool IX

The spacious Grand indoor dock sat halfway in shadow and halfway bathed in golden light. The hazy silhouette of Lindblum's busy, multi-layered bulk framed the open door against the dimming but still vibrant late afternoon sky.

The regent strolled the long gallery decks that stretched across the cavernous space as he often did, long red sleeves occasionally brushing the mirror-polished ornate bronze railings at their sides. At

every intersection stood an equally ornate and highly polished bronze lamppost bearing huge gas lamps. At the central intersection where most of the principal walkways met, a tremendous clock encased in beveled glass in a gilded frame, the prismatic rainbows from the many finely cut glass panes dancing slowly across the room at raucous angles. Here he stopped.

Cid had always thought there was something deeply satisfying and cathartic about seeing ships at rest in drydock.

El Adrel sat off to his right, berthed in what was now the shadowed half of the dock. The airship lay upon the blocking underneath it, silent and still and heavy as stone, belying its true nature and appearing as an immense, immoveable, timeless object that had been there since the entire edifice was built and would always most assuredly be there. One of the rainbows cast by the clock glass had settled on the beautiful bronze scrollwork along the bow and gave the iron-hulled monster a touch of soft ethereality.

On the opposite side, equally silent, equally still, but bathed in warm peach-gold light sat the grand theatre ship *Prima Vista*, and, as Cid let himself sink into deeper thought, the airship that had truly started

it all. With this ship, it seemed so long ago now, had departed the catalyst to start the fearsome whirlwind that had changed so much so quickly, and laid waste to so much, and swept up so many lives.

It had been a joyous and storied day indeed when he had salvaged her from what had once been the Evil forest using Leviathan, the largest airship in all the world and now a legend in her own right, but that was when he had the bit of work in his teeth to distract him. He had been similarly distracted with her subsequent repairs, and the effort and engineering challenge to refit her with steam engines.

Too much free time in ponderous thought had always been dangerous to him, and now he found himself silently screaming in his head, had this entire sequence of events been worth it?

Whenever beset by these fits, he had always found some way to use what was around him to claw to the answer that it was indeed, until he was told the story of Jack.

That story had and was still spreading through the world, and upon reaching his ears and mind had wholly shattered a large part of him and now, he found himself thinking it was in fact not *worth it*;

that all of what had happened had been reasonless and deterministic and senseless. His sense of fate, and destiny, and meaning, and all of the other now seemingly clichéd old concepts that had guided him since childhood and his family for generations now lay scattered about in broken bits on the floor of his world. The man who made ships fit to fly now had a heart heavier than stone, and it became horribly apparent when his incessant motion ceased.

Behind these vessels of luxury and commerce towered the shielded rams of two sisters, Viltgance and Voltaire. Two of his father's armada, the marvelous and respected flying battlecruisers of Cid the Eighth. The vessels to claim more "Firsts" than any other before or since. To this date the only airships built to a family class, the first and only ones who shared interchangeable parts, the first to test and successfully employ the controllable pitch airscrew among other noteworthy innovations. The first creation in Gaia to achieve a speed record of Lindblum to Alexandria in one day. The first power to bring a lasting peace to the world, which had only collapsed due to their absence in the hour of need....

The First Cid had been known as the Explorer King, and by all accounts that was in every way true. Through folly and adventure and hardship, he had

made the physical and figurative foundations that his feet and those of his citizens now rested upon. All the world had been his playground.

Cid the Eighth had been known as the King of Peace, for his armada of flying machines stopping the wars.

Cid the Ninth wished to be the King of Kindness, whether he was known for it or not.

Airships had brought the world to his doorstep and brought his doorstep to the world, and he had always viewed airships as an idealistic and absolute Good, as had his family since the first one pulled itself off the earth. Through the shining open door they offered him he had seen that world and its peoples in remarkable and painful clarity, but the disastrous exploits of the Alexandrian flagship and the fearsome Terran vessel had tarnished this old view, airships were only as good as those who made and flew them. It was his duty to ensure this idealism and opportunism was restored.

He remembered the collective sigh of relief the whole world seemed to breathe when his father's fleet of battlecruisers, his inheritance, had pushed through the clouds and forced a peaceful end to the perpetual bloody conflicts between Burmecia and

Alexandria. He had never felt so confident and trusting of a technology or an idea before or since, and he would return the idea to this state by not resting until his far reaching hand of flying ships had breathed health and prosperity back into the lives of the two wrecked kingdoms.

He traced another rainbow with his finger to one of the many long, Blackwood benches that bordered the walkways at their intersections. Upon the bench it fell he spotted the instantly noticeable white ears of Nella, who was wrapped in the arm of Kurn. Every so often his bald head would shift, as would her ears, as they spoke in hushed tones and love language.

Cid let his ears adjust. Once his mind acquired the quiet, unintrusive pendulum of the clock he was able to put it into the background of the great room, and after a few moments he could detect their whispers over the floor of white noise that hung in the air, but could not discern them.

Their whispers echoed under the arched ceiling and high walls and machinery-laden floor far below, as did every flutter of a bird's wing, every gentle wisp of air, every water droplet falling.

“Bancroft gone, I presume?” Asked a familiar voice, shattering his now whisper tuned eardrums and startling him, causing him to jump backward and be torn from his meditative state. He found himself abruptly in wonder at his own experience, he had never become still enough for that long a period to become in tune with silence. Having no reference point, he would never have thought such a thing possible.

“I must — try to return there....” He murmured.

Artania strode up quietly and on time to the minute for their appointment, for the moment he stopped and drew his feet in line, the works in the great clock tripped with a thunderous steely click and a whir, and began to boom the sounds of seven hours past noon through the hangar from its gongs. A loud and distant chorus of echoing gongs, bells, chimes and steam whistles of all pitches sounded from behind the walls, and issuing up like a chaotic orchestra from the city below outside the hangar door.

Looking back, Cid observed Kurn had covered Nella’s ears with his hands and she had nestled under his chin as if it provided shelter from the rain of idiotic sound.

Artania eyed the clock and only some time after it had stopped striking and its echo had subsided in the great hall did he murmur “When you’ve quite finished” and turned to address his colleague.

“Yes” Cid begun, before he could start. “Captain Bancroft Ellenroad *is* gone, and I predict he is down wreaking his usual havoc, as well as providing a single-handed economic boom to the theatre and business districts.”

His mind was instantly filled with horrifying and all too well detailed images and scenes of just this, all joined together with the commonality of flying droplets of gin propelled by a great and booming and perpetually unwelcome baritone voice behind immense yellowed teeth.

And, if only briefly, the regent’s silent disquiet was replaced with mirth.

“It is agreeable to see you again, Regent.” Artania raised his eyebrows.

“And you, minister. We must reduce the volume of those bells.”

“Need I remind you, that you were the one who asked that they be made louder because you thought they couldn’t be heard over the engines.”

“Quite right Minister, quite right. And now I’ve changed my mind.”

“Better than your body.” Artania narrowed his eyes.

Cid widened his and the angle of his moustache became much more severe.

“Was your trip home uneventful?”

Cid laughed. “Never.”

“Good.” Grinned Artania. “Lindblum has been grounded in the mundane as you can well see. Nothing to report that can’t wait until tomorrow.....”

A sharp and pronounced “twang” echoed from inside the great clock that could be felt in the walkway beneath their feet, producing a brief but noticeable irregular shift in the minute hands. Kurn and Nella looked up at it.

“.....or next month.” Artania finished grimly, again eyeing the great mechanism suspiciously.

“I love my city.” Cid said with a strange combination of laughter and rare, far away wistfulness.

“There is another matter I must discuss with you.” Artania continued, turning toward him with his fingers interlaced.

Cid raised an eyebrow, the opposite side of his moustache following suit as it always did.

Artania turned, and leaned sideways and downward. “Come now, this is the man I told you about.”

Out from behind the formidable pedestal of the clock shuffled three tiny, bedraggled young rats. Two males around ten years old in appearance by his reckoning, holding each other’s hands, and one female who looked to be about half their age trying to keep hidden behind them. Despite being clothed in fresh pressed garments that were obviously recently given to them, their appearance was haggard, weary eyed and miserable.

“As you ordered, any airship under our jurisdiction, including all civilian vessels has been directed to seek out and return any orphaned children from Burmecia or Cleyra immediately to Lindblum should they require medical care.”

Cid felt his heart melting into his shoes.

“These three....”

“I am Cid.” He cut Artania off.

He went to them and knelt. “And I am at your service.”

“I’m René, and this is my brother Sean.” Spoke up the short one of the pair of boys in an easily betrayed mixture of resolute and nervous. “We stick together no matter what.”

“Of course you do.” Cid smiled.

“This was my first time on an airship.” Sean spoke up, quietly. Cid beamed at him.

René tilted his head toward the younger girl, “Her name is Lily, but she doesn’t talk to Humans because you destroyed our home and killed her mum and dad.

Cid recoiled visibly and was silent for a long time. Artania uncomfortably turned away, and some distance away, Kurn and Nella notably shifted.

“Where do you hail from?” Cid asked, much more quietly.

“We’re from Cleyra, but not anymore, because the whole tree is gone now.” René explained flatly, continuing to stare Cid in the face with a flat but

piercing expression. Sean shuffled his feet and suddenly appeared to be near tears.

“Our mum and dad died from the huge fire that made it fall.” He continued.

René then became silent and he and Cid stared at each other in mournful silence. As the regent drew breath to speak, René again interrupted him.

“I didn’t see it happen because I got hurt too much and I couldn’t see, but Sean saw it happen. They told us to run away and cried *a lot*, and then they got turned into smoke and fire.” Another long silence, and an even more piercing stare.

“I didn’t know parents cried.” René said, matter-of-factly, raising his right arm in a mild gesture. Cid observed that its end was a stump, with no forepaw attached to it any longer and an ugly bandage where it should have been.

Sean broke his grasp with René’s intact left forepaw, turned around and sunk his face into his own.

Artania stomped his foot, muttered something sharply under his breath and quickly walked away.

“Don’t leave me here like this you cruel selfish fucking gray bearded bastard. You come back and help, and suffer with me.” Cid fiercely thought toward the vanishing minister.

“Yes.” Cid’s voice cracked like thin glass. ‘Yes they do. And they only do when there is nothing else they can do.’ He felt hot and ugly tears falling. He was actually able to hear them hitting the floor under him. “And I guess that makes it special.”

No one spoke. Cid found himself at a complete loss and felt his knees faltering under him until he felt a gigantic hand come gently down on his shoulder. He looked beside him and through his tears could make out Kurn’s highly polished black boots. The fleet admiral towered reassuringly over his Regent.

With the sound of scampering paws, he saw a white shape in his peripheral vision begin to move. Clearing his vision of tears with his sleeve, he watched as the tiny broken bodied Lily ran unevenly and silently toward Nella. Nella had already instinctively knelt down and had stretched her arms forward. She caught the child in her arms and drew her instantly against her bosom and underneath the curve of her chin. As soon as she had steadied

herself from the catch, she began to rock the little one gently back and forth, and did not stop as she craned her head down to hear something that Lily whispered in her ear, and still did not stop as tears began pouring down her face.

Cid remained on his knee.

“René, Sean, of Cleyra.” He spoke in a whisper, lest he disturb the gentle and sacred thing he was witnessing just a few steps away from him.

The whispers echoed in the great space and, as before Artania and the clock had interrupted his heightened senses; he heard and traced them from wall to ceiling to oblivion.

“Yes, Regent Cid.” Said René, equally quietly, his tail shifting from one side to the other, his forepaw finding his brother again.

“If you wish it, it would be my desire and my honor to care for you, and provide for you a home, and to see to it that you are looked after.”

René stared intently and scrutinizingly at Cid for a time. Cid saw Sean’s forepaw tighten around his.

“Yes, everyone has been so nice to us here.” René said abruptly, and then breaking his stare away from

Cid for the first time and turning his gaze to Nella;
“But only if you do the same for Lily”

Kurn spoke. “You need not even ask, little one.
We have already accepted.”

Nella inhaled sharply through her tears as she
rocked Lily.

“Your Cleyra’s Home Tree lives again, you know,
and it is just as green and beautiful as you remember
it.”

“That is impossible, it was destroyed.” René
stated. “How?”

Cid shut his eyes and offered his hands to René.
“Let me tell you about a brave and wonderful boy
much like yourself, his name was Jack....”

Rainbow beams gently radiated from cupped
hands of the Protector under the vaulted ceiling of
the great cathedral.

Puck gazed up at the subdued spectacle and was
pleased with himself. He had been carefully
gathering shards of glass from the original windows
for quite some time, left in the corners made

wherever walls met ground, after the repair efforts completed and left certain areas, at the bottoms of the basins of fountains, buried just under new cobblestones or repacked soil, or stealing them off the workbenches of the glass casters who used the old pieces to replicate the shattered stories, pictures and figures of the panes anew.

He had arranged the shards in a crude frame of hardened clay and twisted wire left behind by the millwrights of Lindblum, and set it in the hands of the protector with a flame inside. The lantern cast beams of every color through the smoke of the incense and dotted the dark with rays and stars. Those who came to the palace on this day remained there, staring at this lovely scene.

And two who had come on a specific errand clutched paws and were stopped in their tracks due to it.

The Great Sanctuary of the Burmecian Palace had always been a dim and contemplative place where all had sought solace, but with a penchant for the grim and the somber musk of the ages. Here something that was undeniably from the heart of a child lit up the vaulted ceilings and arched alcoves

that were normally dark and only lit by somber torchlight from below.

“Lord Puck?” Asked Freya, arm in arm with Fratley.

“Yes?” His look silently conveyed his desire for her to omit “Lord” from her greetings.

“We have come to make a request.” Fratley bowed to him.

“If you mean that stupid parchment about your renunciation, It’s in the ward....”

“No, not that request.”

“We would like for you to Marry us.” Freya knelt before him, and Fratley followed.

Puck’s tail dropped to the floor.

“Are you mentally deficient or does the fact that I have a bloody headache mean anything to you?” Drunken Bancroft spat toward the immense clock standing against the wall of the business district pub, while the other patrons watched with interest, confusion, and discomfort.

The clock continued ticking loudly in reply, its swinging pendulum serving to further taunt the drunken airship captain.

“You noisome little bastard, that will be five months work in the slag-house for you if you do not be silent this instant!” He craned his neck toward the glass pendulum door and spilled some of the beer in his flagon on the floor in a torrent of suds.

“Impostor!” He roared, alcoholic fizz escaping his mouth. “Trying to look like me won’t help you, you rotten little wall urchin. I’ve dealt with your sort before!”

“I think you aught to leave.” The shopkeeper stomped over. “You’re frightening my customers.”

“You do understand....” Bancroft turned to the shopkeeper, incensed. He furiously pointed at his reflection in the glass pendulum door. “You *do* after all, *understand*, that someone going out of their way to look *exactly as you do* can only mean he intends several variations of only *one thing*, and that is impersonation, deception, *theft* of one’s identity and stature and most likely their belongings and family as well, trickery of the highest order! Not that I would miss my wife in *any* shape or form....”

“You haven’t looked in many mirrors, have you!”
The shopkeeper grinned, trying to restrain laughter.

A grin of absolute arrogant zeal flooded Bancroft’s face as he folded his arms, the sort of expression one would get only after the most astounding cornering and decapitation of the opposition in a vicious argument.

“Mirror? This is a *clock*, you *imbecile*.”

Giggles broke out from here and there amongst those seated at the tables, and “He’s got you there, Arthur!” Came across from one of his regulars.

The clock struck eight, and Bancroft’s eyes almost shattered.

“I told you to be silent!” He hurled his fist at the glass door, shattering it and bloodying his hand. He didn’t notice.

“I’ll have you sent to the orphanage at the base of the inner wall, I’ll give you to the shoe-blackening works, they’ll teach you right respect there you ungrateful little pigeon!”

The clock was silent.

“Are you pleased with yourself, you fuckin’ tosser?”

Bancroft glared at him with razorblades in his eyes.

The shopkeeper suddenly grinned, and crossed his arms to match Bancroft's.

The clock, unfinished with its reply, began to slowly lean forward.

Bancroft did not notice.

The clock went from tilting, to looming, to rapidly accelerating, all with an imperceptibly quiet rush of air. Its growing shadow deepened the dark hollows of Bancroft's eyesockets under his thick and bushy brows.

It then fell upon him with a crash that resembled a thunderous explosion, he disappearing completely underneath and inside it. The many patrons in the pub cheered.

The mirth of others died away to reveal the sound of crashing and tumult inside the clock as Bancroft screamed and fought with its moving parts. A torrent of spilling beer, furious threats and insults mixed with the clatter of flying fists and boots, breaking springs, spinning gears and thrashing and dislodging of arbors, taper pins, racks, pinions and chimes, all

hurtling about in what sounded like a whirlwind confined in a box.

All those in the Green Marble Pub who knew the infamous airship captain knew two things at this moment. Bancroft was Happy, and Bancroft was Home.

The wrought iron benches in the Theatre district were long and comfortable. The curve of their back seemed somehow fit all who sat in them of all shapes and sizes. A marvel of civic planning.

Nella nestled under the black waterfall of Kurn's beard. She clung to him as he massaged her and was met only with kisses when she looked up at him. As he deepened the massage, she fell asleep in his arms.

An old man who had been feeding the birds on the adjacent bench got up to give the couple some privacy.

"Not like humans." He remarked to Kurn as he passed, very quietly.

"Not like Humans at all." Replied Kurn in a whisper.

He closed his eyes, felt her softness clutched to him and drank in all of the little sounds she made, and remembered when he had first done this to her and what a delightful discovery those sounds were. And how, before then, he had been the unfeeling and ceaseless Wheel.

He had passed the Twinstone and its promise to Cid. Their time in Lindblum was drawing closed. Cleyra's soft, glistening green arms far away stood open to them.

Fratley kissed his way up Freya as she knelt on their bed, gazing out the tiny little window. Only when he reached her ears did he take any notice of what she was looking at.

Wei and Kal's children were playing in the tiny lot in front of their dwelling and the street beyond it, and under the eaves of the old cistern shed where she had found Fratley sleeping.

He instantly knew what she was thinking about, and he suddenly found it very hard to resist thinking about it too.

It was a day of smoky haze and shadow when Adelbert Steiner arrived in Lindblum aboard the airship Athiria. Cid's summons had been brief, cryptic and urgent. Steiner hoped fiercely against a quiet tide of his own internal dread that there wasn't yet another setback or catastrophe he would have to bear witness to or participate in.

The hangar of the Grand Castle was cool and dim. A draft of fresh autumn air filtered in from somewhere unseen even with the great doors shut. Most of the machinery lay silent. The Alexandrian guard saluted Steiner as he disembarked the airship's highly varnished deck and almost immediately he nearly tripped over Puck.

"Steiner!" He jumped up and down. "I'm so happy to see you!"

Steiner startled, then grinned. Finally a face he wanted, but did not expect to see.

"Puck, what are you doing here?"

"Cid summoned me, what are you doing here?"

"He summoned me too, do you know anything about it?"

“No, I don’t! He just said to meet him right here, today. Artania greeted me when I got here but then he had to go off and do something else, and I’ve been waiting here for hours, and nobody came to tell me anything! I don’t know what to do now, it’s so damn boring!”

Steiner was dumbfounded. “*You* managed to remain in one spot for *several hours*?”

“Hey.” Puck stamped. “I’m King now.....I have to.”

Steiner looked strangely proud of him. This infuriated the young rat.

“Then we shall go and find someone.” Steiner resolutely trudged toward the steps, beckoning Puck follow him.

It was not long before they found a familiar pointed helmet of the Guard.

“My good fellow, I...”

The guard whirled. “King Steiner! Why are you not with the Regent?”

“We wanted to know where he is.” Puck added.

The guard looked down. “He’s..... well he should have met you two here! We were all given specific instructions that Regent Cid was to meet you here.”

He looked this way and that, and then asked, hesitantly; “I don’t suppose you were told what he summoned you for?”

“Of course not.” Steiner and Puck both said in Unison, the former furrowing his brow and the second trying to restrain a fit of giggles.

“Well he didn’t tell us either. Although, knowing Cid I suspect it may have to do with —” The guard paused in thought for a moment. “Come with me.” He quickly hastened them down a velvet carpeted marble staircase and through a series of doors.

“Commander!” Their guard addressed another, with a slightly taller helmet.

“Yes, what’s... Oughtn’t these two be with Cid?” The latter asked.

“Yes, they want to know where he is — where is he?”

“Down on that new Market Street project of course, we all thought these two were with him!” The commander replied.

“Damn and blast!”

The commander gestured toward the door. “Well then get them down there, by any means you can!”

“Gentlemen, since the aerial omnibus service no longer exists we shall have to find other means of conveyance, this may be somewhat inconvenient, follow me please.”

One whistle from the guard was enough to flag down a millwright passing in the street on a large wooden carriage pulled by a chocobo. It was piled high with barrels.

“Goodness me, two Kings at once?” The old millwright asked, his mustache bristling as he braked the carriage to a stop with a long iron lever. The chocobo’s feet slid over the cobblestones as he too tried to stop.

“Yes and by Royal double-deposition we must implore you for travel to the corner of Market Street and Pollander Boulevard. I will instruct any goods you leave here to be looked after by my men until your duty is complete, and that you be compensated for your time!”

“Oh you mean the new Municipal Railway! That explains it, right lend a hand you!”

“Municipal railway?” Steiner and Puck asked each other.

The Millwright began moving barrels off his wagon and beckoned the guard to assist, and was surprised when Steiner and Puck began to as well, to the guard’s utter horror.

“What’s this? Kings that *work*, of all the novelty! What will they think of next!” the Millwright chortled.

Steiner and Puck shared a joyful glance as they shifted barrels.

The Chocobo, who’s name they found was Sir Arnfield, was fast. George the Millwright coaxed him on a bit faster than anyone else aboard would have liked, and they flew through the cobblestoned streets on four gigantic wooden wheels, dodging children, cats, old women, teams of streetlayers and pipe fitters, other carriages and all manner of city bric-a-brac. Two strong steel-shoed bird feet pounded on the stones.

—Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang—

They descended a steep hill away from the castle, between the shadows of great artificial vertical faces completely covered in buildings and stonework.

George fashioned himself a tour guide as they went.

“That’s the fire ant pub, it’s got the distinction of being the only pub in this district to never change family ownership!”

The wagon lurched over a bad cobblestone.

“And that building there was the first brickworks to ever produce more than one ton per day!”

Steiner held Puck in his lap so he would not go flying off the wagon. He had given up asking to slow down several streets back.

Then they passed over Harrowgate.

Puck and Steiner looked down, and down, and down, into an infinity of buildings and bridges and funnels and plumes of steam, a cut made down to the very bottom waters of the natural basin Lindblum was built in. Looking back in time, older and older city the further down they looked, like the rings of rock in a canyon. Down to the Old city,

before it had ever reached its present towering heights. The miniscule forms of the steam tugs shoving barges under stone viaducts built under stone viaducts built under iron bridges of every description, crisscrossing the cutting who's cliff-like vertical sides were walls of stacked buildings. Engines and machinery whirled and panted hoisting clamshell buckets, crates, platforms and other machinery up and down these dizzying elevations.

The street they were on turned off the bridge over Harrowgate and for a time hugged the rim of its far side, and the two new Kings looked down spellbound and transfixed into the gap, until the wagon turned down another alleyway and the image was left burnt into their eyes and memories, so that the rest of the trip became a blur of windows, doors, brick and shop fronts in its lasting shadow.

They arrived on the spacious and wide avenue of Market street to a completely unfamiliar spectacle as far as the familiar sights and sounds of Lindblum were concerned. The street was so full of wagons and construction materials, regular traffic had been entirely disrupted. Cranes of all sorts towered into the sky like the branches of a forest. Nearly the entirety of the street was shadowed in a gigantic elevated structure, a bridge that followed the street

itself and which rested on rows and rows of riveted iron trussed legs, arched at their tops, and who's deck of crisscrossing timbers filtered sunlight down through thousands of regular slots.

“This is shaping up to be quite a project, I get a lot of business from these big public works!” George grinned as Sir Arnfield drew the wagon to a stop at the side of a bridge leg. “I will finally be able to buy my wife the greenhouse she wanted...”

Workmen bustled about, hooks lifted all to be seen skyward, and the general trend of all supplies, objects, and bodies seemed to be upward, from street to bridge.

For a moment, Puck was suddenly back in Burmecia, during the rebuild. That same fierce energy of making order from chaos, and making something exist where before had been nothing, and that sense of industrial purpose that seemed so entirely Human, flooded his senses. The syncopated beat made itself known from what on the surface appeared to be organized disorder. Fleeting, the method and the melody made itself apparent to him. He read before his eyes glimpses of the sheet music of the song of work and creation unfurling before

him. Without understanding how he understood, he began to *understand*.

The crescendo of a sunbeam punctuated the symphony. The two blades of a silver mustache shewn gold as the head it was attached to sat on top of scarlet that billowed in the wind, on top of a pyramid of timbers and framed by a white and shimmering plume of steam behind him.

Cid waved to them.

Puck found himself waving back.

“Figures we would find him where the work is.” Steiner shaded his eyes with his hand as he looked upward.

“Don’t just stand there!” Cid shouted down, furiously waving his arms. “You’re late and we’ve got steam up!”

Steiner spread his hands in exasperation and glanced at Puck with his mouth open. “Of all the...”

He found Puck’s eyes filled with laughter and his forepaws raised to his mouth. The complaint died on his lips.

“My service to you ends here!” The guard said hurriedly to the two of them, then turning up to Cid

and saluting him. Cid saluted back haphazardly before turning away and disappearing down the stack of timber and away from the edge of the bridge, briefly re-appearing at the railing to impatiently beckon them up.

“Good luck your worships!” George shouted as Puck and Steiner were hurriedly ushered up a rickety set of wooden stairs set up by the workmen.

“Kweh!” Sir Arnfield added.

On the bridge, above the shadows cast upon it to the street below they found themselves in quite another world.

The bridge formed an avenue of railway track, several sets in parallel, crisscrossing at junctions and then continuing on in a straight and unbroken set of silvery parallel lines until the street curved and then with it, out of sight around a corner. Flat, straight and uninterrupted, it looked like a newly laid skittles alley in wood and metal, the sunlight glinting off the perfectly straight rails. Steiner was familiar with the somewhat haphazard single-line trackwork of the Berkmean cable cars but this was far more substantial, presented itself as smooth and permanent and demonstrated possibilities he had never imagined. Rodding and bell cranks sat

underfoot on iron bearings bolted to the bridge, connected to point mechanisms in the track and curious little objects with painted arms lanterns on posts dotted the line side as far as they could see, and near them were rows of what appeared to be water standpipes.

Cid stood atop a strange and purposeful looking contraption. Puck and Steiner instantly found it beautiful, the latter in spite of himself. It stood proudly on the rails upon eight silvery rimmed and extraordinarily finely made wheels and at a glance, it appeared to be a self-propelled carriage made to run on them, covered in copper pipe and apparatus and obviously driven by steam.

“Gentlemen!” Cid exclaimed. “Welcome to the Lindblum Inter-District Municipal Railway, our latest Public venture!”

“What is this?” Steiner asked.

“Yes, what is it?” Puck jumped up and down with excitement.

“This is called a *locomotive!*” Cid replied exuberantly.

“Hah! What an idiotic word.” Steiner threw his head back.

“Says you!” Cid jumped down from its driving platform. ‘We’ve already had small ones in the hangar for a long time to move things around, the first one came in my father’s day, before that you had to shove those carts up there around on the rails by hand and it took such a long time to do anything. Would you believe we had powered cranes up there before we had these?’ He banged on the plum painted side. “Of course this one is much different, it’s meant to go *fast!*”

Cid spoke with a force they had known from him only in his deep creative passion. They had last heard it in him so long ago when they had ridden with him on the first test run of the third airship named Hilda Garde.

“I’ll know if you’ve been mucking about with my engine!” shouted a sharp and scratchy voice. A pencil-thin young man with a harsh and sooty face, sunken eyes and high cheekbones, a pointed nose and a close shaven head walked briskly up with a large brass oil pot and a box of tools. He was covered from head to toe in coal dust and his clothes were stained in oil.

“Haven’t, I swear.” Cid put his hands behind his back.

The young man eyed him suspiciously.

“Right then make yourself useful, and that goes for the lot of you if you’re coming.”

“Coming?” Steiner asked.

“We get to go for a ride?” Puck added with excitement.

“This is what I summoned you for, I wanted you to see our grand new experiment first hand, this new elevated railway system is history in the making, there was no way I’d let you miss it.” Cid replied. “It’s bad enough you missed the first leg of its construction, and the first runs over it!”

“I thought something terrible had happened! Why couldn’t you bother to say that in the summons!”

“And spoil the surprise?”

“Cid, I *hate* surprises!” Steiner jumped up and down on the spot. “We’ve all had enough surprises to send us all to an early grave!”

“You hate everything, Adelbert!” Cid laughed. “And you will most assuredly hate this, so come and do so merrily my friend.”

“A man who hates everything is a man I can understand. The world can be such a stupid place.” The young engineman said, extending a hand to Steiner.

“I certainly do *not* hate everything. I only hate what is out of the ordinary.” Steiner replied, completing the handshake and being surprised at the immense size of the hand that was offered, and at the force the sooty young man put into it. “And you are?”

“Alexander.”

Steiner paused with surprise.

“Something the matter?”

“That is an *excellent* name!” Steiner beamed.

The young man blinked. “Why?”

“That is the name of a great and powerful and true *protector*. My Kingdom draws its name from one who shares yours.”

“Ah I see now, *that’s* who you are!” The young man’s grin split his blackened face with yellowish white. “Sir Steiner, don’t worry I’ll dispense with all that your highness stuff. Just call me Alex.”

Steiner was instantly dismayed.

“But I think I’d know you anywhere.” Alex turned to Puck, and bent down. “It’s so good to meet you.”

Puck took Alex’s big hand in his forepaw.

“Give me just a moment.” Alex turned, leaned against the side plate of the locomotive and shouted, “For the last time, *where is Phil!*”

Several workmen looked up, and one of them shouted back. “Last I saw he was headed to the tavern to cram his face!”

Alex appeared furious. “That fat bastard. Nobody can ever stick to a plan when there’s *food* around now can they!” He whirled back to the three Kings.

“Gentlemen, it seems I’ve lost my fireman. I wish I could say this wasn’t a regular occurrence! *Which* one of you knows how to fire a steam engine?”

Steiner and Puck blinked.

“I do!” Cid raised his fist.

Steiner was aghast and Puck again covered his face with his forepaws.

“Right then take this.” Alex handed him a wood handled coal scoop, and banged on the handles of two large long fire irons resting on forked brackets down on top of the big side boxes that formed the engine’s water tanks. “Poker and fire rake live here, be careful where you swing them and don’t hit the sight glasses, and don’t get coal all over my footplate you fancy-dressed bastard.”

Steiner’s eyes turned to dinnerplates.

“Right!” Cid saluted.

“Damper’s there, blower’s here, your feedwater pump recirculating valve is there, blastpipe choke is this one, steam heating to the tank is here. Yes, before you ask the brake ejector draughts up the funnel. Superheater damper *iiissss here!* Safety valve starts to lift at a hundred eighty. Leave the rest to me.” Alex pointed to several levers and wheels in succession.

“Oh so you’ve improved upon the ejector then?” Cid asked.

“Yes no more of that over the side nonsense, and we are now maintaining vacuum with a pump driven off the crosshead instead of a second ejector. Uses less steam, works way better.”

Cid's mustache bristled and he opened the fire door. Inside burned a bed of red hot coals. Puck was suddenly transported back through his memory to El Adrel's engine room. The Regent scooped up four shovelfuls of the shining black rock from the open bunker behind them and evenly sprinkled them over the fire. The new black coal bed quickly sprang to life with tongues of flame. He pulled up the lever he had been shown for the damper.

Alex spun a large crank beside the boiler and put his hand on a long and curved brass lever mounted in a quadrant above the fire door on the back of the boiler and gently pushed it away from him.

The locomotive, which had until now presented itself as a fairly inert object besides the wafting steam from its funnel, the dull roar of its fire and quiet percolations suddenly seemed to tense up and spring to life. Steam hissed out from the undercarriage and seated the machine on a cloud of sunny white vapor. Steiner immediately grabbed the sturdiest object he could find, which was a large brass wheel on top of an iron pedestal coming up from the deck.

"I see you've found the handbrake. Release that please." Alex directed him.

Steiner stared dumbly.

“Counter-clockwise.”

Steiner spun the wheel as he was told. The locomotive slowly began to glide backward, toward a curious looking wagon sitting a short distance behind them. A frame of plumb-bob accelerometers sat in a steel-clad cabin in the center along with several weights on springs, a curious looking clock and other instruments that were harder to recognize. Benches sat in rows along its flat bed and the ends were adorned with lanterns and brass railings.

“We’ve been using this car to test the track, and what happens at different speeds, and even how different types of wheels work and which are best. Recently we’ve been using it to determine what the optimal taper for the wheel treads are!”

Alex drew the brass lever toward him and the machine coasted, and backed gently onto the car. A man clad in old slacks jumped on from the side and with a deft movement, coupled them together with a chain. With a quick word of thanks, Alex then spun the crank several times around and moved the brass lever away from him again.

Another cloud of steam and this time they rolled forward, with the car rolling behind them.

“You have the token!” Shouted another man leaning from the window of a curious building built right on the bridge, directly adjacent to their track. Alex leaned out to meet him and received a small brass staff with a parchment wrapped around it. “You are lined up for the middle track all the way to the Grand Boulevard, no opposing traffic and nothing laid up!”

“Right!” Alex saluted as the locomotive began to speed up, and pocketed the staff.

“The possession of this token means we have permission to go down the middle line without worrying about hitting anyone else, if we have the token, nobody else can, and thusly nobody else can take the line!” Cid explained. “It’s a bit limiting but it will do for now until we figure out the signals better!”

Alex moved a lever on the floor forward and the hissing of steam from underneath stopped, and was replaced with a defined rythmatic beat up the funnel. The machine began to speed up further and everyone present was overtaken with a sense of definite motion, as their speed began to exceed that of an

able-bodied sprint. The tracks divided and the locomotive negotiated the complex arrangement of rails with great ease, and a great deal of clattering.

Alex and Cid glanced at each other, and Cid made several rapid changes to the controls he had been given as Alex slowly pushed the long brass lever all the way over to the opposite end of its travel, and quickly wound back the crank in front of him.

Everything changed. The sound from the funnel loudened into that of cannon blasts and the locomotive seemed to *lean* ahead, like an athlete hurling themselves into a run. Without lurch or jolt, the machine pulled itself to a speed neither Steiner or Puck had ever been accustomed to on land, and it simply kept accelerating.

“Yes!” Cid roared. “Yes, yes, yes!”

Buildings and rooftops and windows flashed by on either side as they darted in and out of beams and shadows cast by the low hanging morning sun. They found themselves suddenly hemmed in on both sides by rises in the buildings and land as the street became a cutting, they passed under a steeply inclined stone viaduct, and as quickly as it came, everything dropped away and Market street was on a

viaduct of its own over a great height, with their railway bridge straddling it on its iron legs. The steam engine careened forward like a shooting star as Alex continued to wind back the crank, scowling and bent over his controls. The funnel blast was now a constant roar, and down under the side boards the wheels and rods that connected them were a blur of silvery whirling motion.

“What say you!” Cid laughed as the locomotive jumped and swayed.

“This is *terrifying*!” Steiner responded, clenching the side of the bunker in a death grip.

“It’s faster than an airship!” Puck proclaimed with delight.

“And it’s faster than this!” Alex grinned, and opened the steam valve for a shrill whistle that cut the air over the city. He wound the crank forward a half turn and spun a brass handle coming up from the footplate. “Cid, tend that fire!”

Cid stoked furiously until the fire bed was a white hot sun behind the firedoor. The steam gauge climbed and with careful adjustments of the big silvery crank the engine did the seemingly impossible and again picked up speed. Now even

Puck held on for dear life as his ears billowed behind him in the wind.

They had never seen this or any city unfurl before them like a carpet before. Lindblum opened before them like a book, and the pages flipped by as if that book had been opened into a gale. The steam locomotive devoured distance and time and the railway line and city in front of it with a ravenous appetite. Neither Steiner nor Puck had ever imagined something on wheels could ever move this fast.

“This railway will be able to carry more — *far* more — people, goods, anything imaginable, than the fleet of flying omnibuses we had before!” Cid began to shout at them, his mustache appearing on the verge of being torn from his face by the wind. “And it will do so faster and in a safer and less costly way!”

“Pardon me if I am dubious about our safety!” Steiner yelled back.

“Nonsense!” Cid more banged than patted Steiner on the back. “Compared to all those flying machines filling the air? Do you know how often our municipal air omnibuses would almost hit each other? And sometimes they would, I had far too many reports of that on my desk for my liking when

the service really gained popularity! This system is based on structure!”

The engine navigated an uneven track joint that sent them all stumbling around the footplate, except Alex who appeared cemented to his spot and for all the world to be a part of the machine itself.

“Structure that needs improvement!” Steiner furiously responded, making sure he had not crushed Puck.

“The good thing is...” Cid regained his footing. “When this steam locomotive can be less powerful than the awful little mist engine fitted to one of those flying cabs, and yet draw behind it five hundred people instead of ten, and let them off and on anywhere along a predetermined route with almost no risk of collision, you’ve got what I would call a tangible improvement!”

“Where do you all get the energy for any of this?” Steiner asked. “Isn’t it enough for anyone here to live a quiet life after all that has happened? Why do any of this?”

“Because I love my city and I love my people!” Cid beat his chest. “I will do anything to improve

their lives, Nobody said my father could make a *ship* fly the skies, either!”

Steiner and Puck gazed at him and seemed to forget the rocking and speed of the vehicle that bore them along.

“A people who are free to move are prosperous, a society where all basic needs like health, food, water, heat and transit is democratic and fair for all, whether they deserve it or not! Everyone has the chance to better themselves and live free of pain and misery and scarcity and suffering! The world has had more than its fair share of that! Great Public Works such as these are the most effective way to make these dreams real!” Cid wrung his hands with a fiery passion, his silvery hair and mustache shimmered with the fire of the passing sunbeams as if they were made of spun gold and his face took on an expression that they had never seen in him before. It was very different from the childlike glee they had seen when he had finished a new airship.

Puck and Steiner felt a hand upon their backs and saw Alex had moved from his post racked over the controls and had his arm behind them. Without any prompt or request to do so he began to explain the machine as he worked it.

“Regulator!” He pointed to the long brass lever at the back of the boiler. “Moderates the flow of steam from the boiler to the engine! It’s all the way open now, when you shut it off, there’s no power anymore and we will coast to a stop!”

He then pounded on the large crank beside the boiler he had been working to different positions. “Reverser, but does more than that!” Steiner stared Dumbly while Puck followed Alex’s finger by laying his paws on the machinery. “This changes valve timing, it doesn’t just reverse the engine but changes the entire way it runs through different speeds!”

“The boiler is a closed vessel filled most of the way up with water, it surrounds the fire on all sides, the exhaust gasses from the fire go through tubes under the water in the long portion and into the smokebox where the ash settles and up that chimney, the steam exhausting from the engine helps blast it up there, fairly simple!” He waved his arms this way and that as he worked. They were reminded of a crab. “Engine drives the wheels of course, and a water pump. As the water boils off we need to force in more to the boiler to replace it, there’s a pump between the frame driven by an eccentric, you can vary the stroke with this lever!”

He waved to two glass tubes in brass housings to either side of the regulator. “These give you the level of the water in the boiler!” And then to the largest of several ornate and highly polished gauges. “And this is the steam pressure — *which seems to have gone away, what’s all this!*”

Alex went from manic to furious and instantly opened the fire door.

“Cid you bastard what happened to the fire!”

In his fierce orations about matters of Lindblum, Cid had forgotten to tend the furnace. Inside burned a sickly white hot irregular bed of coals with holes burnt away showing red-hot fire grate bars. The steam pressure had rapidly fallen away.

Alex snapped the regulator shut and slammed the dampers closed. “Might melt the bloody firebars too! Don’t just stand there!”

The funnel was silent and the locomotive coasted.

Cid began shoveling coal on like a madman to Alex’s utter chagrin, and he slowly urged up the dampers. The newly added coal only served to smother what little remained of the fire, and did not ignite.

Alex's eyebrows drew down a letter V over his eyes and his scowl cut ear to ear, and he settled down on the seat box lower and lower as the locomotive backed down from its great speed.

Cid angrily cracked the fire door again and again to check and re check the fire, willing the new coal to catch. He saw only total darkness. Each time he peered through the slot between the doors, Alex became more miserable.

Due to the low steam pressure and their low speed, the brake vacuum began to fail and the brakes crept on, bringing them rolling to a disappointing and thoroughly embarrassing stop.

They stared at Alex and Cid, Puck with mirth, Steiner with nervous apprehension. Cid looked at Alex sheepishly and Alex glared back with a peculiar blend of rage, misery, futility and pathos.

“Regent, you’ve put out the damned fire.”

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